



STRATEGIKA

Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present

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CRISIS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

IN THIS ISSUE

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ABOUT THE POSTERS IN THIS ISSUE

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Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis

By Soner Cagaptay

Three wars that Turkey is currently involved in, namely in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus, suggest that Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's foreign policy has settled into a new phase. Erdoğan is building a "mini Empire" by—often—simultaneously fighting and power-brokering with his Russian homologue, and to this end the Eastern Mediterranean provides ample opportunities for him.

In Syria, Turkey supports rebels opposing the Assad regime, itself backed by Russia. In the South Caucasus, Turkey backs Azerbaijan, which is trying to recover its occupied territory from Armenia, a close Russian ally. And in Libya, Ankara backs the internationally recognized Tripoli government against forces supported by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Putin's mercenaries, known as Wagner's Army.

At the same time, rising tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and Greece have raised concerns regarding conflict between the two NATO allies. Turkey is also at loggerheads with Cyprus, an ally of Greece.

Franco-Turkish tensions, too, are rising in the region. Recent press reports according to which Paris claimed the Turkish navy "illuminated" a French vessel off the coast of Libya in June 2020 point at growing tensions between Ankara and Paris—again around the Eastern Mediterranean basin. Turkey is nearly playing alone against France, Greece, Cyprus, Syria, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, and often also Russia around the eastern rim of the Mediterranean Sea—but can it win?

War in Libya

When Libya descended into civil war in 2014, Erdoğan threw his support behind the—at the time—mainly political Islamist factions in Libya's western-based Dawn Coalition, which would later, and following addition of other factions to it, morph into the country's internationally recognized Tripoli government. The Dawn Coalition's adversary has been the Dignity Coalition, mainly led by General Khalifa Haftar's forces in the country's east.¹

Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and his ally, the UAE, worried about the ascent of political Islam in Libya next door to Egypt (and eager to undermine Erdoğan), were quick to assist Haftar's forces; they carried out air strikes aimed at the Tripoli factions.

In a countermove, Turkey signed two agreements with Tripoli in November 2019: a memorandum of understanding on providing the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli with arms, training, and military personnel; and a maritime agreement delineating Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the Mediterranean waters separating the two countries.²



Image credit: Poster Collection, TU 38, Hoover Institution Archives.

In December 2019, Erdoğan announced that he was willing to deploy troops in Libya if the GNA requested it.³ He reiterated the offer during a December 15 meeting with GNA prime minister Fayed al-Sarraj in Ankara⁴—a visit that arose after Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) renewed its push to take Tripoli by force.

In January 2020, Turkey’s parliament authorized the deployment of troops to support the GNA.⁵ Since January 2020, around 80 Turkish military personnel have been stationed in Tripoli as part of a train-and-equip program. One unit has been deployed to operate the radio jammer systems sent to the GNA by Turkey to jam Tripoli’s airspace.⁶

Libya has emerged as a focal point of Ankara’s foreign policy, which seemingly regards the country as an arena for Turkish proxy competition against Egypt and the UAE, and vice-versa. At the same time, Libya’s GNA has become increasingly dependent on Ankara for military reasons—namely, a lack of other allies willing to provide arms capable of countering the LNA’s Emirati-supplied drones, and the arrival of Russian mercenaries who added new technology and precision weapons to Haftar’s war against Tripoli.

Countering the “East Med Bloc”

Ankara’s Libya policy also stems from its isolation in the East Mediterranean, which has gradually worsened since the rupture of Turkish-Israeli ties in 2010 and Erdoğan’s regional policy miscalculations during the Arab Spring uprisings. On the latter front, his support for Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood in 2011–2012 cost him dearly after that government was ousted by mass protests and replaced with a military-backed administration led by President Sisi, and supported by his allies in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.

Soon after coming to power, Sisi opened talks with Greece to delineate their maritime economic areas. He then held a three-way summit in November 2014 to promote a deal for supplying natural gas to Egypt from undersea fields off the coast of Cyprus. Cairo also hosted the inaugural meeting of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum earlier this year, notably excluding Turkey. Egypt has also been conducting joint air exercises with Greece since 2015, with Cypriot forces participating in 2018. Separately, they carried out three rounds of joint exercises in Israel earlier this year.

These initiatives have pitted Ankara against an emerging coalition of old and new adversaries across the East Mediterranean, mainly Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel. Given its cool-to-hostile relations with these states, Ankara is alarmed by the rate at which they have come together in strategic cooperation.

Ankara’s new maritime agreement with Tripoli was forged in part to counter such cooperation. The November 28 accord established a virtual maritime axis between Dalaman on Turkey’s southwest coast and Darnah on Libya’s northeast coast (far from the GNA’s practical area of control). In Erdoğan’s view, drawing this line will allow him to cut into the emerging Cypriot-Egyptian-Greek-Israeli maritime bloc, while simultaneously pushing back against Egypt and the UAE’s pressure on the GNA.

Enter Russia

Although Erdoğan and Putin back opposing sides in the civil war, their operational track record in Syria speaks volumes about their potential for reaching an understanding in Libya.

Recently, Moscow has been playing both arsonist and firefighter in Libya: it gave critical advantage to Haftar by deploying mercenaries to boost his forces, and providing his troops with technology to shoot down drones, forcing Tripoli—and Ankara—to the bargaining table. Putin may force Haftar to agree to Russia’s position as Libya’s “peacemaker” by pulling some crucial support away from him.

What is more, Putin could use Libya to align Turkey with the Russian position in Syria and the South Caucasus. On January 13, 2020, during a Libya summit, Turkish and Syrian intelligence chiefs met in Moscow, underscoring Putin’s desire to get Ankara to shake Assad’s hand and wrap up the conflict in Syria on terms favorable to Russia and Damascus.⁷

And France . . .

In addition to strategic calculations, Ankara's Libya policy has a key driver: Turkey wants to collect Gadhafi-era debt in Libya—totaling billions of dollars—and have access to new and lucrative construction contracts in that war-torn, but oil-rich country.

Enter France, which also wants to take a large slice of this cake. Accordingly, vying for money, contracts, and influence (Turkey is currently reportedly building a military base in Libya), Ankara and Paris have been supporting opposing sides in Libya.

What is more, Ankara's success on the battlefield in Libya, pushing Haftar's forces away from Tripoli by militarily supporting the GNA, has upset Paris. In return, France has decided to consolidate its partnership in Libya with Turkey's regional opponents: Egypt and the UAE.

What is more, emerging differences between Ankara and Athens in the Eastern Mediterranean have provided France with another opportunity against Ankara. Recently, tensions have flared up between Ankara and Athens over Kastellorizo/Meis, a tiny Greek island that lies a stone's throw away from the Turkish coast. If Kastellorizo/Meis were to have the continental shelf fully claimed for it by Greece, the island would cut across the virtual maritime Dalaman-Darnah axis that connects Turkey to Libya.

Accordingly, Franco-Turkish competition has now moved next door to Turkey, where Paris has responded to Ankara by throwing military support behind Greece, and also partnering with European Union (EU) members Cyprus and Greece to legislate sanctions against Ankara in Brussels.

To add to Franco-Turkish rivalry, the two countries also have opposing views of regional governance. Whereas Ataturk's Turkey was the epitome of French-style secularism that envisions keeping religion out of politics, Erdoğan's embrace of political Islam is the antidote to it—and Paris fears Turkey spreading this style of politics regionally from Syria to Libya to the rest of North Africa.

Conclusion: Erdoğan's "Empire"

As of 2020, Erdoğan's foreign policy has had mixed results. He is often at odds with various NATO allies, most notably France. He has failed to shape the outcome of events in Syria, where his opponent, the Assad regime, has overwhelmed Turkey-backed rebels, with support from Russia and Iran. He has also failed so far to shape the outcome of the conflict in Libya to Turkey's clear advantage.

In both conflicts, Erdoğan's policies have also resulted in geopolitical troubles, putting Ankara at odds with Turkey's adversaries: Moscow and Tehran in Syria, and Cairo, Paris, Abu Dhabi, and Moscow in Libya. To alleviate his challenges in Libya and Syria alike, Erdoğan has decided to make deals with Putin, but is also becoming ever more reliant on the Russian leader to achieve his goals in both places, and now potentially also in the South Caucasus.

POLL: What is the prime cause of tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean?

- Uncertainty over which nation has the most compelling claim to newfound offshore gas and oil wealth
- An aggressive Turkey that is deliberately undermining NATO unity
- A renewed Russian presence in the Mediterranean
- The reluctance of NATO and the United States. to project sufficient deterrent force in the region
- Ancient Greek and Turkish rivalries

Rising tensions between Turkey and Greece are alarming. For the time being, these tensions seem to have subsided thanks to German and NATO mediation, and I do not expect NATO allies Greece and Turkey to go to war.

Similarly, I do not anticipate NATO allies France and Turkey entering into conflict. I do, however, believe that Ankara and Paris will continue to compete for power and influence around the Mediterranean Sea.

It is fair to say that Erdoğan's policies have not made Turkey a star-power nation in the Middle East: In 2020, Ankara is also left with no Middle Eastern friends—with the exception of Qatar and non-state Hamas. What is more, Turkey faces a number of adversaries in the Eastern Mediterranean, ranging from France to Greece to Egypt.

But, as an astute politician, Erdoğan deserves credit for his canny ability to line up Turkey's broader national security interests in Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and elsewhere—also thanks to his desire to get along with Putin.

Overall, whether Erdoğan can continue to play his game in the Eastern Mediterranean depends on the health of Turkey's economy. Since 2018, the economy has shown signs of weakness, including currency crises and a 2019 recession. If Turkey suffers an economic meltdown, it will be hard for him to maintain Ankara's current stance in these areas. He will have to turn his attention to the country's domestic troubles.

Otherwise, expect Erdoğan to continue to play an interventionist role in the Eastern Mediterranean for the foreseeable future.

- 1 Soner Cagaptay, *Erdoğan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 177.
- 2 "Libya, Turkey sign deals on security and maritime jurisdictions," *Al Jazeera* (November 28, 2019).
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- 4 "Turkey ready to give any military support Libya needs: Erdoğan," *Reuters* (December 15, 2019).
- 5 "Turkish parliament passes Libya deployment bill, but troops unlikely for now," *Reuters* (January 2, 2020).
- 6 Metin Gurcan, "Could fragile cease-fire lead to peace in Libya?" *Al-Monitor* (January 13, 2020).
- 7 Metin Gurcan, "From Russia with love: Turkish and Syrian spymasters meet in Moscow," *Al-Monitor* (January 18, 2020).



SONER CAGAPTAY is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. He has written extensively on U.S.-Turkish relations, Turkish domestic politics, and Turkish nationalism, publishing in scholarly journals and major international print media, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Jane's Defense Weekly*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The Atlantic*, *New Republic*, and *Newsweek Türkiye*. A historian by training, Dr. Cagaptay wrote his doctoral dissertation at Yale University (2003) on Turkish nationalism. Dr. Cagaptay has taught courses at Yale, Princeton University, Georgetown University, and Smith College on the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Eastern Europe. Dr. Cagaptay is the recipient of numerous honors, grants, and chairs, among them the Smith-Richardson, Mellon, Rice, and Leylan fellowships, as well as the Ertegun chair at Princeton.

It's Not the Energy, Stupid!

By Zafiris Rossidis

In 2020, with the strong presence of American, Russian, French, Greek, Turkish, Egyptian, Italian, and even German warships, the Eastern Mediterranean has become one of the most militarized seas in the world.

It's all about geography. In the Eastern Mediterranean there are two of the three gates to and from the Mediterranean: the Bosphorus and the Suez. It touches the Middle East coast where the interests of many powerful countries are at stake, it has energy resources, and it lies on the New Silk Road. It is important for international navigation, the European Union, and it serves the interests of countries such as the United States, China, Russia, the UK, and France.

Even though the U.S. was a dominant power in the region during and after the Cold War, today its presence has declined significantly, because its attention has turned to the Persian Gulf against Iran, as well as the South China Sea in order to halt China.

This decline has left room for revisionist actors to fill the power vacuum: Russia, Turkey, Iran, and China. The first three are heavily involved in Syria, and the latter is moving steadily to occupy the lion's share to maritime transfer, infrastructure, 5G networks, etc.

All of them are developing a new geopolitical scheme of a Eurasian Multi-Power of a loose but functional grouping of many Eurasian states, whose core is the China-Russia axis. They form an informal Eurasian NATO, but with a much greater geopolitical depth, dynamics, and solid *raison d'être* than the real NATO.

The recent escalation in the region started when Turkey dictated a Memorandum of Agreement to the Libyan Government of National Accord that parcels out the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Eastern Mediterranean in a way that denies Egypt, Israel, and Cyprus access to Greece and to the European market, without Turkish approval. From the point of view of International Law, this agreement is profoundly illegal, mainly because it denies huge Greek islands such as Crete and Rhodes of their own EEZ.

Then Turkey defied Greece's and Cyprus' rights on their EEZs and gas fields, by sending drilling ships and frigates into the region.

It is interesting to note that apart from the unfounded legal basis of its claim, Turkey adopted the same aggressive rhetoric as China in its illegal claims in the South China Sea. China, exactly like Turkey, threatens U.S. allies like Australia, Taiwan, Japan, etc. Of course, in the South China Sea, the United States has naval and air forces to back up its allies, reminding China that she is not allowed to harm Western interests.

The same is not happening in the Mediterranean. The U.S. eclipse forces France, Israel, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, and the UAE to form multilateral and bilateral schemes to control Turkey's aggression.

In the West, media outlets are mischaracterizing the true source of disruption in the Eastern Mediterranean, portraying it as a mere dispute over energy sources. Given that it is unclear whether these deposits are large enough to be drilled and that their future exploitation is unlikely to be profitable, does this dispute deserve a military conflict? Furthermore, there are big exploitable deposits of rare earth elements in northern Greece,



Image credit: Poster Collection, GR 29, Hoover Institution Archives.

something that could lessen the United States' dependence on imports from China. Instead, at the core of the recent crisis between Greece and Turkey is a dangerous ideological divide.

Turkey has attributed to itself a role that goes beyond that of just a considerable regional power. It maintains that it deserves the status of a global power, thus gaining an equal footing with the rest of the earlier enumerated Eurasian NATO countries. To achieve this, it needs an ideology, a theoretical starting point. And this is Neo-Ottomanism. This is actually the reason Turkey sides with Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood and questions international treaties like the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne that ended the Ottoman Empire. Apart from being verbally or militarily aggressive to almost all of its neighboring countries, Turkey has military bases in Albania, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Libya, in occupied Cyprus, Qatar, Somalia, and Syria. From 2015 on, it claims rights on exploiting Arctica and Antarctica, labeling itself a "Polar Power." Its Public Diplomacy institutions are extremely active in the Balkans, in Central Asia, even in Central Africa. Last July, Turkish minister of foreign affairs Cavusoglu visited Central African countries, among them Niger, where remarkable uranium deposits exist, vital for Turkey's nuclear program. This is one of the reasons for French annoyance over Turkey's actions in Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, areas of historical interest for French foreign policy.

At the same time, Turkey's extremely sharp animosity against Israel brought it closer to Egypt and other more hard-core Arab countries such as the UAE, with more to follow. Even the Arab League was alarmed by Turkey's revisionism, its secretary general stating that Turkey's active role in tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Caucasus will not end well for it.

Turkey is lost for the West. The Cold War mentality is outdated and the roles have changed. NATO is becoming a castrated organization like the EU, without a footprint in international politics. America's absence from the Mediterranean gives space to revisionist countries to serve their interests, which don't match with those of the West. It is characteristic that the first U.S. intervention in the Greek-Turkish military standoff took place only when it became known that the Turks had activated their S-400 radars.



ZAFIRIS ROSSIDIS is the former head of Public Diplomacy Directorate at the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He has worked for the Greek government as a press attaché in Albania, Israel, Finland, Croatia, and Denmark. He holds university degrees in physics and history, an MA in modern European history from the University of Athens, and a postgraduate degree in public diplomacy from the National School of Public Administration of Greece, and is a PhD candidate in the Department of Economics, University of Thessaly. His doctoral dissertation is titled: "Public Diplomacy as a Promoter of Economic Diplomacy. The Cases of USIA, China and Israel." Rossidis graduated from the Hellenic National Defense College and also from the Joint School of Information Warfare of the Hellenic National Defense General Staff, where he is now an instructor. He served as an NCO in the Hellenic Navy Special Forces.

Crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean

By Barry Strauss

The Eastern Mediterranean, like the Middle East, is a tough neighborhood. The current standoff over natural gas rights among Greece, Turkey, and their respective allies is only the latest example.

Greece and Turkey are locked in a dispute over fossil-fuel exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, both off the coast of Cyprus and elsewhere. Since the discovery not long ago of undersea gas and oil reserves in the area, the stakes have grown high. Greece and the European Union claim that Turkey is drilling illegally in the region, while Turkey asserts its rights. Each side has claimed an Exclusive Economic Zone.

Greece and Turkey have a long history of conflict. A sketch here cannot do justice to the long history of suffering and to the claims and counterclaims on both sides. Although there has been substantial progress in recent decades in building up goodwill on both sides of the Aegean, there have also been numerous military confrontations and a few near misses. No wonder the current dispute over fossil-fuel rights is so contentious.

The matter led to tense negotiations and even more tense deployment of military resources this summer, both on the sea and in the air. In recent years, Turkey has built up an impressive navy, but Greece is no slouch at sea, and it has important allies in France and Israel as well as Egypt and the UAE.

Greece and Turkey have both sent warships into the Eastern Mediterranean, and France has sent ships as well in support of Greece. All three countries are NATO allies, while France and Greece are both members of the European Union. Turkey has the most powerful military in NATO, aside from the United States, while France is the EU's biggest military power.

The United States has three choices in the region. It can intervene militarily, it can intervene diplomatically, or it can withdraw. Withdrawal would be unwise because what happens in the Eastern Mediterranean doesn't stay in the Eastern Mediterranean. This strategic region impacts the power of both American friends and competitors: NATO, the European Union, Israel, the Arab states, Russia, Iran, and now China. Few Americans, however, would favor a significant American military involvement in the region. That leaves diplomacy, and diplomacy requires allies.

The United States must support its friends and allies in the region; as it happens, they include both Greece and Turkey. To be sure, the U.S. has had its ups and downs with each country over the years. Tensions with Greece have arisen over U.S. support for the military junta that ruled Greece 1967–1974, and over the Cyprus crisis of 1974. Tensions with Turkey include such issues as U.S. support for the Kurds in Syria and Turkey's purchase of Russia's S-400 air defense system.

Current Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been a lightning rod of controversy. He is no friend of democracy, but Turkey still has significant democratic political forces. Nor will Erdoğan last forever.



Image credit: Poster Collection, GR 30, Hoover Institution Archives.

With historic ties dating back to American support for the Greek War of Independence in 1821, Greece's importance to the U.S. might seem obvious to the American public. Turkey's population, strategic location, regional ties, and economic and military power, however, all offer significant resources to the U.S. Nor do American and Turkish interests always diverge. In the tragic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, for example, both sides have reason to support Azerbaijan as a counterweight to Iran and to Russia. Finally, for all its flaws, Turkey is infinitely more appealing as an American ally under current circumstances than is Iran with its revolutionary regime.

Erdoğan's threatened use of force in the Eastern Mediterranean is part of a larger program of expanding Turkish power both on land and at sea. His foreign policy, often dubbed neo-Ottomanist, has seen Turkish intervention in such places as Libya, Syria, Iraq, Gaza and Jerusalem, Azerbaijan, and the Persian Gulf. He has wielded the threat of Turkey's ability to open and close the spigot of refugees and other immigrants to the EU.

When it comes to natural gas rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, the West must pursue a policy of compromise based on law and diplomacy. On the one hand, it should not give in to Erdoğan's thuggish behavior nor be cowed by his use of force. That's why the military support given to Greece is so important. On the other hand, the involvement of Erdoğan does not invalidate Turkey's grievances. As a country with a long seacoast on the Mediterranean, Turkey has a reasonable claim to share that sea's natural gas. Almost all Turks, regardless of political party, hold that position. Nor are Erdoğan's other foreign policies without support at home, even among his political opponents. Given such recent developments as the growth of the Turkish economy and the withdrawal of the bulk of America's military presence in the region, under both Presidents Obama and Trump, it's not surprising that Turkey seeks to expand its power abroad.

The United States, working with its European allies, should work for a compromise solution. No claim to complete control of the area by either side would be a fair outcome. There are legal precedents for adjudicating maritime borders that would allow an equitable distribution of maritime rights between Greece and Turkey. Achieving this end will require close transatlantic cooperation, bringing together Washington and Brussels. It will also take determination, not excluding sanctions and other economic pressure. The road will probably not be easy. But to return to our starting point: The Eastern Mediterranean is a tough neighborhood.



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Discussion Questions

1. Is there still a future in NATO for Turkey?
2. What is the Russian role in the Eastern Mediterranean dispute?
3. Are France and Germany at odds over the Greek-Turkish standoff?
4. What triggers might escalate the tensions into a major-power war?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- “Is the Mediterranean Still Geo-strategically Essential?” *Strategika* 62 (December 27, 2019). <https://www.hoover.org/publications/strategika/issue-62>
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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

China and the Origins of the Coronavirus

Military History in Contemporary Conflict

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of “War, Revolution, and Peace.” Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: “The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man’s endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life.” From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the “Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict” has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution’s dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

Strategika

Strategika is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.



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