Despite the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the creation of a new and shorter highway connecting Europe and the Far East, the Mediterranean has not always been of central importance to world politics. Multipolarity in the world at large and in that sea in particular was frequently followed by a substantial increase in the strategic importance of the Mediterranean. It is the aim of this paper to further elucidate this point by providing a brief account of Mediterranean politics in the countdown to the Second World War. It is also hoped that this narrative of near-anarchic international politics will remind us of the decline of British naval mastery and the attempts of Greek policy-makers to steer clear of the concomitant complications.

In the aftermath of the First World War, Britain’s ailing economy, an unprecedented public demand for defense cuts and the possibility that the naval strength of the United States Navy would soon surpass that of Britain, compelled His Majesty’s Government to sign the Washington Treaty in 1922.\(^1\) The resulting one power standard in capital ships that Britain adopted vis-à-vis the USA and the termination of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in the same year, owing to adverse reaction from America and the Pacific Dominions,\(^2\) complicated British defense planning in its most important Imperial possessions. Indeed,

as a source of trade, markets, investment and raw materials the British Empire East of Suez was of vastly greater significance than, say, the apparently unpromising Mediterranean. English business, to be sure, had substantial investments, in, for instance, Spanish mining, the Greek public debt, Egyptian cotton and the Suez Canal Company but none of these –save possibly the last- had the actual or potential importance of the capital invested in India, Burma, Malaya, the East Indies and…China.\(^3\)

The defense of the British Empire in South-East Asia and the Pacific was also affected by the London Naval Treaty of 1930 and the Great Depression. The former had delayed until 1936 the capital ship replacement plan that the Admiralty had expected to begin in 1930, while the latter, by deferring current expenditure to balance the budget and secure the flow of funds back to the Bank of England, had wrecked a

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sizeable portion of Britain’s contract starved shipbuilding industries.\(^4\) Given the difficulty of balancing the British budget and the limited monetary contribution of the Pacific Dominions towards imperial defense\(^5\) it is not surprising that the direct defense of the United Kingdom, not other overseas territories, absorbed most of the available resources during the larger part of the 1930s. And this, at a time that Japan’s industrial and financial structures considerably strengthened and the Japanese First World War territorial gains left her in a strong position to dominate the Far East.\(^6\)

Financial crisis and disarmament, the emphasis on the defense of the metropolis, the economic importance of the British Empire East of Suez and the threat posed to it by the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 all conspired to bring about a considerable British defense investment in the Pacific. This took the form of the Singapore naval base and the commitment to dispatch there the British main fleet in an emergency regardless of other concurrent threats to British imperial interests. This arrangement, which held good for most of the 1930s, was affected at the expense of the security of the Mediterranean interests of Britain,\(^7\) and was facilitated, by the misleading strength of her interwar Mediterranean position.

During the interwar years,

Britain’s hegemony in the Mediterranean was apparently assured by her control of both major entrances to the sea, at Gibraltar in the West and Suez in the East and through her naval base at Malta in the Central Mediterranean…. Moreover, under the terms of the Lausanne Peace Treaty Turkey’s exclusive control of the Straits had been ended and British naval vessels could sail up the Black Sea at short notice. Through its mandated rule in Palestine and other former Ottoman territories Britain had also acquired strategic depth and reserve for the defense of the Canal.\(^8\)

Notwithstanding these solid facts, a closer look at the interwar defense capabilities of Britain in the Middle Sea unveils a number of glaring deficiencies. “Malta, Gibraltar, the Mediterranean fleet, Egypt and other local British interests were void of air defenses. Most of the warships maintained in the fleet were unmodernised and scarcely fit for war duty. The British military and air forces kept in the Mediterranean were equipped for imperial policing duties rather than for strategic defense.”\(^9\) This unsatisfactory state of affairs was not just the product of neglect of the defense of Britain’s Mediterranean possessions. It also related to the absence of local competitors in that sea until the Abyssinian Crisis of 1935-1936.

\(^8\) Pratt, L. R., *East of Malta West Of Suez*, p. 9
\(^9\) Ibid., p. 10
Despite their frequent diverging naval armament policies and British reluctance for an alliance with France the naval relations between the two Western Democracies were largely supplementary during the interwar period.\textsuperscript{10} Beginning with the British support for naval parity between Italy and France in the Washington Naval Conference (1922)\textsuperscript{11} the British also made a consistent attempt to form a good working relationship with Mussolini’s Italy. This, incidentally, involved a good deal of tacit acquiescence in fascist imperialism which did not constitute a direct challenge to Britain’s Mediterranean supremacy until 1935. Indeed, most of Mussolini’s grandiose demands were directed against the French Empire and against France’s allies in Eastern Europe, thus fomenting a destabilizing antagonism between the two latin sisters.\textsuperscript{12}

The “untroubled waters” of British naval diplomacy in the Mediterranean came abruptly to an end in 1935. Following Japan’s renunciation of the London Naval Treaty in December 1934 Germany declared Luftwaffe’s superiority vis-à-vis the RAF in April 1935. Since “European Security constituted the priority for His Majesty’s Government, the British Treasury was now likely to direct much of the funds set aside for defense to strengthen the RAF. With the expansion of the Royal Navy severely restricted, any building up of the German Navy would present a serious threat to Britain. Consequently, the Admiralty urged the British government to pursue a naval agreement with the Germans that would guarantee Britain a substantial advantage in European waters.”\textsuperscript{13} The ensuing bilateral negotiations resulted in the provision for the development of a German navy of a tonnage not exceeding 35\% of that of the British fleet.\textsuperscript{14} This agreement, running as it did against the disarmament provisions of the Versailles Treaty (1920) and the recently concluded Stresa agreement (1934), opened the way for Italy’s violation of the territorial integrity of Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{15}

Following the conclusion of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935 the North Sea naval forces of Britain were strengthened at the expense of the British Mediterranean fleet.\textsuperscript{16} Taking advantage of this development and in possession of more modern and technologically advanced naval vessels and aircraft Italy embarked on her Ethiopian campaign in the autumn of the same year.\textsuperscript{17} There followed eight months of intense diplomatic bargaining and mutually threatening aeronaval dispositions between the Italian and the League of Nations’ forces.\textsuperscript{18} In the course of this facedown, which ended with the complete subjugation of Ethiopia by the Italians, Greece reluctantly took the side of the League even if she had much to lose by the disruption of her trade with Italy and a lot to fear from Italian vengeance at a time of military unpreparedness and economic exhaustion.\textsuperscript{19} Greek reluctance was matched by the limited interest of the British naval

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\textsuperscript{11}Salerno, “Multilateral strategy and diplomacy”, p. 41

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 45

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 48

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., pp. 49-54

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., pp. 41, 53, 57

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 56

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 61

\textsuperscript{18}Hardie, P., \textit{The Abyssinian Crisis} (Batsford, 1974). Pratt, L. R., \textit{East of Malta West Of Suez}, pp. 29-37

authorities in using Greek ports and naval installations in the course of this crisis. British limited interest in Greek naval potential was not unrelated to the British intention not to fight against the Italians, since a naval war with Italy would not be quick, easy and painless. “With three British battleships and one battlecruiser out of commission for refitting and extra warships deployed in the Mediterranean, there were only three capital ships remaining in home waters, capable of engaging the new German pocket battleships. Most disturbingly, there were no major vessels in the Far East available to face the formidable Japanese Navy. Fighting the Italians in the Mediterranean, and losing British warships in the process, could tip the naval balance in the North Sea in Germany’s favour and all of China and South East Asia would open to Japanese expansion.”

The consequences of the Ethiopian Crisis were far-reaching and defined the Mediterranean and, to a lesser extent, world politics in the countdown to the Second World War. The offensive impetus of the Abyssinian adventure continued to characterize Italian naval policy. The knowledge of the Italian naval expansion, the conclusion of the Axis, and the uncomfortable fact that the total number of British capital ships could be reduced to nine by 1939 obliged British policy-makers to appease Mussolini on a number of occasions. The Gentlemen’s agreement of January 1937 and the Eastern Pact of April 1938 are the most celebrated examples of this.

British appeasement of Italy somewhat mirrored French naval policy towards the latter country. Disappointed by British appeasement of the Axis and the reluctance of successive British administrations to secure France against Italy and Germany, French policy makers attempted to arrest the deteriorating naval relations between the two countries. A naval understanding between them promised, above all, the maritime connection of France, with her North African Empire and her Eastern European allies. French as well as British attempts at appeasing the Dictators were hardly successful. However, they gave time to both countries to pursue their re-armament programs without dislocating their domestic economic life. This was a sine-qua-non if the Western Democracies would possess the staying power to repeat their traditional national strategy of defeating the enemy after two to three years of hostilities. On the contrary, the limited resources of the Axis Powers obliged them to pursue an all out, short and successful war.

The futility of appeasement, most obvious in the conduct of the Axis during the Spanish Civil War and the Munich Crisis, brought closer the two Western Democracies, a development manifest in their bilateral

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21 Salerno, “Multilateral strategy and diplomacy”, p. 65
22 Ibid., p. 69
23 Ibid., p. 69
25 Pratt, L. R., *East of Malta West Of Suez*, pp. 135-138
28 Pratt, *East of Malta West Of Suez*, p. 108
naval staff talks in 1939.\textsuperscript{30} For the French, this constituted the realization of a long-held aim; for the British this was a radical departure from the settled naval policy of the “Main Fleet to Singapore”. To be sure, the overwhelming naval concentration of British sea power in the Mediterranean during the Ethiopian Crisis of 1935 and its no-intervention during the Far Eastern Crisis two years later\textsuperscript{31} foretell this U turn in British naval policy. Be that as it may, the British decision to give priority to the Mediterranean theatre over the Far Eastern one in 1939 meant that the Italians were in no position to challenge the aligned Anglo-French forces, which were larger and technologically superior to their Italian counterparts. “In fact, Italian naval inferiority contributed significantly to Mussolini’s decision to remain neutral once war started.”\textsuperscript{32}

Notwithstanding the decisive influence of the Great Powers on Mediterranean affairs, the naval policies of smaller powers such as Greece are not devoid of interest. In the immediate aftermath of the Abyssinian crisis, the Metaxas Dictatorship attempted to balance between Britain and Italy. The haste with which his administration re-established normal relations with that country, its renunciation of the Greek commitment to support militarily any Balkan Pact member against Italy, and the deferral of the British invitation of the Greek fleet to Malta, attested to this.\textsuperscript{33} However, the Montreux Convention of July 1936 and the concomitant Anglo-Turkish rapprochement, Yugoslavia’s treaties of 1937 with Italy and Bulgaria and the Salonika agreement of July 1938 underlined Greece’s increasing isolation and encouraged her to conclude an alliance with Britain.\textsuperscript{34} To this end, Metaxas offered to Britain a Greek alliance in May and October 1938 and January 1939.\textsuperscript{35} The British rejection of Metaxas’ proposals related to the customary reluctance of His Majesty’s Government to enter into binding commitments with other countries. Notwithstanding this, the heavy expenditure that the development of the Greek war machine and the fear of provoking the Axis also contributed to this.\textsuperscript{36}

Perhaps the most interesting part of Metaxas’ proposals for an alliance with Britain concerns their naval dimension. Not only did the Greek dictator entertain erroneous hopes as to the utility of the Saronic and the Corinthian Gulfs for the British Mediterranean fleet;\textsuperscript{37} he also espoused contradictory propositions regarding the future force structure of an allied Greek Navy. Metaxas’ alliance proposals of October 1938 asked for British credits for the erection of coastal defenses and the building of light naval units.\textsuperscript{38} Three months later his government’s proposals focused on the procurement of a hybrid type of heavy cruiser\textsuperscript{39} which ran against the established Greek naval policy of buying a flotilla navy that would not antagonize Turkey.\textsuperscript{40} Metaxas disguised this startling lack of continuity of naval thought by invoking the utility of the cruiser in interrupting the Italian Black Sea trade, alluding obviously to the fact that three quarters of the

\textsuperscript{31} Pratt, \textit{East of Malta West Of Suez}, pp. 57-58
\textsuperscript{32} Salerno, “Multilateral strategy and diplomacy”, p. 70
\textsuperscript{33} Barros, \textit{Britain, Greece and the Politics of Sanctions}, pp. 186, 189, 205-206, 215-216
\textsuperscript{36} Pratt, \textit{East of Malta West Of Suez}, pp. 155, 158. TNA, ADM 116/3499, Simon to Foreign Secretary, 29 September 1938
\textsuperscript{37} TNA, ADM 116/4200, Enclosure in 106/24/39 Medhurst, Ross, and Packer to Waterloo, Athens 24 January 1939
\textsuperscript{38} TNA, ADM 116/3949, Waterlow to Foreign Office, Athens 16 October 1938
\textsuperscript{39} TNA, ADM 116/4200, Enclosure in 106/24/39 Packer to Waterloo, Athens 24 January 1939
\textsuperscript{40} G.A.K, Metaxas MSS, File 121, Isigitiki Ekthesis, (no date, beginning of 1935) p. 3
Italian oil imports came from the Roumanian oilfields.\textsuperscript{41} Not surprisingly, the British did not rise to the bait owing to the large sum of money that the purchase of the cruiser required, her long time of building and the possibility of provoking a minor naval arms race by building a new class of naval vessels.\textsuperscript{42} In rejecting the Greek cruiser proposal the British might have also counted upon a possible wartime Turkish closure of the Straits to Italian trade.\textsuperscript{43}

In the countdown to the Second World War the territorial integrity of Greece was guaranteed by Britain and France following the Italian occupation of Albania in April 1939.\textsuperscript{44} This, as had been demonstrated by similar guarantees extended to Greece during the Ethiopian Crisis, was no substitute for a formal alliance.\textsuperscript{45} It was, however, a sign that the Western Democracies were not indifferent to the fate of Greece and the naval facilities that she might offer them in wartime.

To sum it up, the interwar strategic importance of the Mediterranean considerably increased toward the end of this period due to the emergence of regional powers that could challenge British sea power. The appeasement of Italy was not successful thus forcing Britain to focus on that Sea. Considering the fluidity of Mediterranean naval politics, Greece was justified to maintaining a balance between Italy and the UK. However, Metaxas’ proposals concerning the future structure of the Greek Navy left much to be desired.

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\textsuperscript{41} Quartanaro, “Imperial Defence on the Eve of the Ethiopian Crisis”, p. 208
\textsuperscript{42} TNA, ADM 116/4200, Military Branch to Foreign Office, London, 20 February 1939, Appendix A
\textsuperscript{43} Pratt, \textit{East of Malta West Of Suez}, p. 156
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., pp. 159-160
\textsuperscript{45} Barros, \textit{Britain, Greece and the Politics of Sanctions}, pp. 150-151
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