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Cyprus as Centre of Gravity: Transnational Insecurity and Soft Regionalism in the Eastern Mediterranean

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Power cycles and power transitions in the East Med

At a global level, the Eastern Mediterranean has always had a critical role, since it stands at the crossroads among Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Currently, this sub-region represents a distinct regional security complex,¹ crossed by many intersected variables of insecurity: conflicts and state fragmentation (Syria), authoritarian upgrading (Egypt, Turkey), sovereign debt crisis effects (Greece, Cyprus), uncontrolled migrations, rivalries on energy resources, presence of jihadi militias and informal actors (Syria, Lebanon, the Sinai peninsula), the Israeli-Palestinian issue, frozen but unsolved conflicts (Cyprus), and rising geopolitical tensions in the Aegean (Turkey and Greece).

In such a framework, not only Cyprus' geostrategic role has dramatically risen, but also the Eastern Mediterranean experiences a double power transition. As a matter of fact, the United States' unipolar moment ended also in the Mediterranean;² the American influence has waned due to shifting international balances of power and restraint trends. Given Washington's post-hegemonic role in the Middle East, Russia and China are able to expand their leverage in the area, marking a clear transition to multipolarism.³

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¹ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

² Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War," *International Security*, 21:4, (Spring 1997), 49-88.

³ Spyridon N. Litsas and Aristotle Tziampiris (eds), *The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition: Multipolarity, Politics and Power*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015).

Moreover, in the last decade, inter-state relations in the East Med were affected by changing power cycles,⁴ altering also foreign policy postures. Many sub-regional powers, Greece, Turkey and Egypt, passed through critical points: harsh economic decline (Athens); remarkable economic development, failed coup and social polarization (Ankara); popular uprising, military coup and counter-revolution (Cairo). But as long as the external and multipolar penetration rise in the Eastern Mediterranean, due to Russia and China's growing influence, intra-regional cooperative formats – involving states such as Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan – develop now in frequency and level, so crafting an endogenous-driven order in the East Med.

Shifting balances of power: from unipolarism to multipolarism

The Mediterranean is no more the “NATO lake” it was supposed to be during the Cold war, as testified by the first-ever Russian-Chinese joint naval exercise held in May 2015.⁵ This dynamic was also accelerated by the Arab uprisings' failure, which shifted consolidated alliance patterns. Donald Trump's administration has shown little interest for this fundamental sub-region so far. Notwithstanding Barack Obama's “pivot to Asia,” the former US administration appointed a special envoy for international energy affairs (supporting regional cooperation in the Levant Basin), maintained the strategic equilibrium between Greece and Turkey and played the facilitator role in Cyprus' reunification talks.⁶ Moreover, president Obama travelled to Athens for his last official visit in November 2016, emphasizing Greece's pivotal role for regional stability.

Russia and China's presence in the area grows. Geopolitical interests are primarily behind Russian military penetration in the region, the Eastern Mediterranean connecting Moscow to the Black Sea's ports. Differently, China's rising leverage in the sub-region is predominantly motivated by commercial ties and maritime security, in the framework of the “Belt and the Road” initiative (OBOR). In Syria, Moscow has designed spheres of influence with Iran and Turkey, enhancing not only its naval presence in Tartus, but also carving-out a new airbase in Hmeimen and facilities elsewhere on Syrian soil. In 2016, after the shooting down of a Russian Su-24 over Syria by Ankara, Russia has re-established pragmatic relations with Turkey and boosted economic and defense ties with Egypt (as testified by the access in the Egyptian military base of Sidi Barrani), with an eye to Libya.⁷ Chinese investments for the development of the Suez Canal are part of the OBOR initiative. Since 2016, China's COSCO Shipping Corporation controls the greater part of the Piraeus Port Authority, willing to transform Athens in OBOR's Mediterranean commercial hub. Cyprus is also increasingly attractive for China and other regional powers' investments, because of stability, favourable taxation regime and European Union membership: Nicosia is a commercial gateway towards Europe. On April 2017, Cyprus and India signed deals on merchant shipping and air aviation.⁸ After the nuclear deal, Iran and Cyprus agreed on a double taxation avoidance to enhance

⁴ Charles F. Doran, *Systems in Crisis: New Imperatives of High Politics at Century's End* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁵ Franz-Stefan Gady, “China and Russia Conclude Naval Drill in Mediterranean,” *The Diplomat*, 22 May 2015 <http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/china-and-russia-conclude-naval-drill-in-mediterranean/>.

⁶ Harry Tzimitras and Mete Hatay, “The Need for Realism: Solving the Cyprus problem through linkage politics,” Brookings Institution, Turkey Project Policy Paper No. 9, October 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/turkey_20161005_cyprus_problem.pdf.

⁷ Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali-Lin Noueihed, “Exclusive: Russia appears to deploy forces in Egypt, eyes on Libya role-sources,” Reuters, 13 March 2017 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-libya-exclusive-idUSKBN16K2RY>.

⁸ <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-cyprus-ink-agreements-on-air-services-merchant-shipping/1/941104.html>.

trade and investments.⁹ In 2016, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates opened permanent embassies in Nicosia.¹⁰

Currently, the Eastern Mediterranean mirrors the ongoing multipolar international system; here as elsewhere, Washington's ambitions of global hegemony have vanished and new powers are filling the void. However, the United States and China don't play a zero-sum game in the area, since they share some objectives as freedom of navigation and countering violent extremism.¹¹ But Russia is another, contentious story. It is also aligned with Iran and, indirectly, with Teheran-backed transnational Shia militias. Moscow is all but disappointed with a still divided Cyprus, since Nicosia's entering Partnership for Peace (PfP), and eventually NATO, would be a less favourable geopolitical option for Russia if compared with the status quo. Russian military buildup in Syria bolsters Moscow's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) aspirations in NATO's southern flank, and particularly the Eastern Mediterranean. Also for this reason, long-term investments and the renewal of the United States-NATO's facilities in Souda Bay (Crete), acquires more and more critical relevance, given its support to operational missions in the wider Eastern Mediterranean (for instance, reconnaissance and refueling), plus the presence of the NATO Maritime Interdiction Operations Training Center.

Pursuing interests, balancing threats: networks building for soft regionalism

In a multipolar system, alliances and alignments are not fixed, but quite interchangeable and fluid, magnifying entropy and disorder. In the Eastern Mediterranean, sub-regional alignments on specific issues, as well as multidimensional fora among regional states, are on the rise. However, Turkey remains isolated; this is already a visible trend, whether or not soft regionalism¹² will develop into structured regionalism. Regional states attempt to balance power, but not only. They also try to balance threats and threats perceptions;¹³ Greece, Cyprus, Egypt and Israel share all complex relations vis-à-vis Turkey. Athens and Nicosia's historical tensions with Ankara are well known, while it is still useful to briefly shed light on Cairo and Tel Aviv's reasons behind difficult relations with Ankara. Since 2013, Egypt has been cracking down on the Muslim Brotherhood, overlapping national security and regime security;¹⁴ Turkey, ruled by the AKP, supports the Brotherhood in the Middle East. In 2010, Israel and Turkey were at odds because of the *Mavi Marmara* incident. Since the July 2016 failed coup, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has eased tensions with Benjamin Netanyahu's government pushing for rapprochement with Israel, in the framework of a recalibration in regional policy. But a new regional crisis is going to test the alignments once more. On June 2017, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt decided to break diplomatic and economic relations with Qatar, blamed of "terrorism." Turkey immediately rallied with Doha; Ankara, who is constructing its first-ever military base abroad in Qatar, sent more troops and warships in the small

⁹ <http://cyprusbusinessmail.com/?p=20484>.

¹⁰ Eleonora Ardemagni, "Cyprus-Gulf monarchies intensify cooperation: seeds of a strategic partnership," *NATO Defense College Foundation*, Strategic Trends, September 2016 <http://www.natofoundation.org/east-med-september-2016/>.

¹¹ John Calabrese, "China's Role in Post-Hegemonic Middle East," Middle East Institute, 1 May 2017 <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/chinas-role-post-hegemonic-middle-east>.

¹² Robert A. Scalapino, *Major Power Relations in Northeast Asia* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987).

¹³ Steven M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in international politics* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1976).

¹⁴ Robert Bryner, Baghat Korany and Paul Noble (eds), *The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1993).

emirate, confirming pre-planned joint military drills. In this dispute, Israel sided with Saudi Arabia against Qatar, since Doha is Hamas' main patron; this deep rift is going to affect the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement.

The historical interdependence between the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Persian/Arabic Gulf has become nowadays even more pronounced, stressing the growing interpolarity¹⁵ existent among states belonging to different but adjacent "poles" or sub-regions. Greece hosts several inter-polar initiatives to promote East Med-Middle East states cooperation, as the Rhodes Conference for Security and Stability. Cultural diplomacy is also a tool for networks building, as testified by the Athens' Conference on Religious Pluralism in the Middle East and the Forum of Ancient Civilizations, which gathered ministerial representatives from Egypt, Iraq, Iran (plus China and India).

With regard to blossoming regionalism, Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Italy signed in Tel Aviv, on 4 April 2017, a preliminary agreement for the construction of the East Med pipeline.¹⁶ This project would convey Israeli and Cypriot offshore gas to Europe, through Crete, thus reducing the European Union's dependence on Russian and Algerian's gas imports, without transit through Turkey. Energy diplomacy has bolstered high-level meetings among Greece, Cyprus and Israel: they are the bulk of an emerging endogenous-driven order, motivated by energy and security interests, common threat perception (Turkey) and regime similarities (democracies).

Although the Jerusalem Trilateral Declaration, signed on 8 December 2016, states that "though our partnership is special, it is not exclusive in design or nature,"¹⁷ this tripartite alignment is evolving into an alliance and represents a growing security constellation in the Eastern Mediterranean vis-à-vis Turkey. Such geopolitical block is also vital for the protection of United States' interests in the area, as demonstrated by the American, Greek and Israeli naval interoperability exercises (*Noble Dina*, Cyprus has just become an observer) occurring since 2011.¹⁸ Greece and Israel signed a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in 2015, and frequent air exercises are held respectively in Greece and Israel. During the last three years, Cyprus and Israel expanded their initial cooperation in search and rescue exercises (SAREX) into more complex air defence (SEAD) exercises over the island (*Onesilos-Gedeon*), while on June 2017 Cyprus and Israel were engaged in joint military drills at Troodos mountains (*Jason*, and *Kinyras-Saul*).

The Greek-Cypriot alliance has been investing in tripartite patterns of cooperation with East Med neighbors. Security cooperation and military interoperability, as well as energy, commerce, tourism and environmental issues are the core of the partnership with Israel, while energy and economic cooperation for Greece-Cyprus-Egypt. The first trilateral meeting with Jordan was held on April 2016 and a tripartite meeting will be organized by the end of the year with Lebanon; in both cases, security, energy, irregular migration and terrorism are on the agenda. Beyond the vital fact that multilateral cooperation is also a way to strengthen state sovereignty,¹⁹ these high-level meetings are also useful venues for networks building; for instance, when Egypt broke diplomatic relations with Qatar in June 2017, Cairo asked Athens to represent it in Doha. Although trilateral

¹⁵ Giovanni Grevi, "The inter-polar world: a new scenario," EU-ISS Occasional Paper No. 79, June 2009.

¹⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/78ff60ca-184c-11e7-a53d-df09f373be87>.

¹⁷ <http://www.pio.gov.cy/moi/pio/pio2013.nsf/All/80290E0A99E6CFD4C225808300626B48?OpenDocument&L=E>.

¹⁸ <http://www.defensenews.com/articles/us-israel-greece-poised-for-annual-maritime-drill-in-eastern-mediterranean>.

¹⁹ Amitav Acharya and Johnston Alastair Iain (eds), *Crafting Cooperation: Regional International Institutions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

meetings were already part of Athens' foreign policy, Alexis Tsipras' government has stressed the multidimensional character of Greek foreign posture, intensifying trilateral efforts to strengthen alliances and recover from the negative effects of the imposed austerity measures.²⁰

Cyprus as centre of gravity: transnational insecurity and the maritime trapezium

In such a volatile context, Cyprus' geopolitical weight was visibly enhanced; the island is an oasis of stability, although dysfunctional given the unsettled conflict, within an unstable environment. As mentioned before, Cyprus stands at the crossroads of intersected variables of insecurity. Among these variables, many are transnational; *transnational insecurity* is the current cosmotheory²¹ able to capture the geopolitical drivers and the security challenges of our times. Transnational insecurity is the product of the crisis of the state as traditional governance actor (both in Europe and in the Middle East) and affects the state's effectiveness and security, so eroding its domestically/externally perceived legitimacy. But transnational insecurity can't be tackled by single states as independent entities, since it needs multilateral and multilevel answers.

Similarly, Cyprus shapes geographically a *trapezium of security* amid the Mediterranean, Africa and the Persian/Arabic Gulf region. In this imaginary trapezium, essential for global energy security and trade, the four corners are waterways and choke-points: Cyprus, Suez, Bab el-Mandeb and Hormuz. Nowadays, Cyprus is the only stable side in this "geopolitical trapezium," since new maritime balances of power and threats have been redrawing regional as well as international security.²² As a matter of fact, two major strategic antagonisms shake the Gulf: Saudi Arabia vs Iran and Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates vs Qatar. Therefore, incidents are more likely than before in the Hormuz Strait, as naval skirmishes between Iran and United States' warships have multiplied. Yemen's civil and now regionalized war threatens freedom of navigation in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait; Houthis Shia insurgents, that controlled Bab el-Mandeb's close territories for a long time, often strike rockets, missiles and drone-boats against Saudi, Emirati and American's warships in the area. Piracy is also resurfacing amid the Gulf of Aden and Somali coasts. With regard to Suez, the contiguous Sinai peninsula is a growing source of concern, mixing security vacuum, tribal disenfranchisement with respect to the central state, irregular economy networks, the presence of jihadi groups (including Daesh-affiliated ones), plus deep links with Hamas in the Gaza strip.

From a geostrategic point of view, the global coalition against Daesh start from the United Kingdom's sovereign base in Akrotiri for strikes against jihadists in Iraq and Syria.²³ Since 2015, Cyprus allows Russian warships to temporary use – as other European and American naval units – the Limassol port for refueling.²⁴ On April 2017, Cyprus and France strengthened the previous

²⁰ Aristotle Tziampiris, "Foreign Policy against Austerity: SYRIZA's multifaceted experiment," in *Greece: Foreign Policy Under Austerity*, eds. Spyridon N. Litsas and Aristotle Tziampiris (London: Palgrave, 2017), 261-292.

²¹ My elaboration on "cosmotheory", refers to Panayiotis Ifestos, "Structural Changes and Emerging Patterns of Strategic Behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Transition from Bipolarity to Multipolarity", in *The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition*, pp. 21-29.

²² James Leigh and Predrag Vukovic "A Geopolitics of Cyprus," MERIA-Rubin Center, December 2011, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2011/12/a-geopolitics-of-cyprus/>.

²³ Ewen MacAskill, "RAF supporting French airstrikes against ISIS in Syria," *The Guardian*, 17 November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/17/raf-supporting-french-airstrikes-against-isis-in-syria>.

²⁴ "Cyprus denies 'Russia deal on military bases,'" BBC News, 9 February 2015 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31293330>.

defense agreement to include new domains of shared concern, as energy and maritime security, terrorism, anti-piracy prevention, early warning and crisis management.²⁵

What lies ahead? Regionalization of security fosters Cyprus' niche diplomacy

Given the absence of global governance and a rising multipolar international system, security becomes a regional matter of the most urgent priority. In the Eastern Mediterranean, as in other areas, the management of security will likely become more and more regionalized. Notwithstanding diversified alignments with global powers, regional states are called to build effective, sub-regional partnerships to cope with transnational insecurity and power transitions; *regionalization of security* is an emerging trend and, at the same time, a necessity. Greece, Cyprus and Israel represent a blossoming model of security building architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean, with complementary roles: Greece is the stability pivot and the potential energy hub, Israel is the added value in terms of military capabilities, and Cyprus is the balancer (especially between the US and Russia), firmly committed to multilateralism in foreign policy.

Cyprus' talks collapse affects sub-regional balances. As previously analyzed, the enduring stalemate on Cyprus' reunification promotes regional cooperation over energy and security. Instead, in case of an agreement, the East Med project would have been downplayed by the suggested Israeli pipeline towards Turkey via Cyprus, the simplest route in terms of feasibility; this would have weakened regionalist attempts. What is paradoxical is the "gas factor:" Cyprus' energy resources have been fostering soft regionalism, but they have not improved the reunification chances in Nicosia so far. Ankara threatens to interfere in Nicosia's scheduled drillings in Cyprus' EEZ, contesting a "unilateral decision." Turkey, who abandoned EU membership aspirations, will likely embrace a "sovereign democracy" path²⁶ and could opt for a more assertive stance on the Cyprus issue, with particular regard to the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" ("TRNC") status, opening a new confrontational season in the region. In the East Med, soft regionalism can be seen as an example of underbalancing²⁷ vis-à-vis Turkey; this posture could turn into firmer balancing depending on regional developments.

Tensions between Greece and Turkey have already risen in the last years, reviving the classic security dilemma. Ankara violates systematically Athens' national air-space, Flight Information Region (FIR) and territorial waters, questioning the validity of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and stressing the "grey zone" rhetoric. The Greek Supreme Court also refused to extradite eight military officers who escaped in Greece after the failed coup against president Erdoğan.²⁸

Given the evolving Eastern Mediterranean picture, global and regional players will likely strengthen previous relations and deals with Cyprus or seek for arrangements and facilities on the island. Under a stricter regional cooperative framework, Cyprus could be able to express its

²⁵ <http://cyprus-mail.com/2017/04/04/defence-agreement-upgraded-france/>.

²⁶ Nathalie Tocci, "Turkey and the European Union: Scenarios for 2023," FEUTURE Background Paper, University of Cologne, September 2016, <http://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/turkey-and-european-union-scenarios-2023>.

²⁷ Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security*, 29:2 (Fall 2004), 159-201.

²⁸ Helena Smith, "Tensions flare as Greece tells Turkey ready to answer any provocation," *The Guardian*, 27 March 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/27/tensions-flare-greece-turkey-answer-provocation-erdogan>.

underexploited small state foreign policy's potential, consolidating the bridge-builder vocation²⁹ and carving-out a niche diplomacy³⁰ role in the Mediterranean.

²⁹ Micheal. W. Mosser, "Engineering influence: the subtle power of small states in the CSCE/OSCE," in Erich Reiter and Heinz Gärter (eds), *Small States and Alliances* (Heidelberg: Physica-Verlag, 2001), 63-84.

³⁰ Andrew F. Cooper (ed), *Niche Diplomacy. Middle Powers After the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997).



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