





COMMENTARY


A new cooperation for energy security: the U.S. strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean

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A NEW COOPERATION FOR ENERGY SECURITY: THE U.S. STRATEGY IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

In April 2019, the U.S. Senator Bob Menendez, Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Marco Rubio, Senior United States Senator, announced the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act¹: a quadrilateral energy and defense agreement between the U.S., Israel, Greece and Cyprus.

Washington has never denied its interest in the region, particularly after the discovery of significant natural gas fields. However, it is reasonable to expect that a renewed American presence in the Eastern Mediterranean could raise reciprocal, economic and military reactions in the region².

Historical Background

After the end of the World War II, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union showed a significant interest in the Eastern Mediterranean. Unlike Moscow, Washington could rely on several allies such as NATO partners, Israel, and Turkey in order to keep its hands on the region.³

However, when the Kurdish issue broke out during the Syrian civil war, Kurds started fighting for the creation of an autonomous region in northern Syria, which was then promised to be supported by the US.⁴ Under the mentioned conditions, both the U.S. and Turkey started to be sceptical about the intentions of each other and the deterioration provoked a remarkable diplomatic crash not only between Ankara and Washington but, in the long run, also between Ankara and Brussels.⁵ As a consequence, Russia rapidly reaffirmed its interest in the Eastern Mediterranean and, in 2012, the Kremlin started to be increasingly engaged in the region both economically and politically.⁶ The peak was reached with the military intervention in Syria and, from that moment on, Russia's influence across the region started to spread. Nicosia allowed the Kremlin to have access to its ports for antipiracy and counterterrorism actions⁷ and, in 2017, Egypt authorized Russia to temporarily use both its military airspace and its military bases.⁸

In light of these developments, the U.S. decided to priorities the recreation of solid strategic partnerships with the Eastern Mediterranean countries. When Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Egypt discovered new natural gas fields close to their coasts, Washington aimed to instrumentalize them for strategic purposes. In a very short time, in fact, the U.S. companies made financial investments to

¹<https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/eastern%20med%20res.pdf>

² Daily Sabah (2019) Turkey's rights in East Med unquestionable, Erdoğan says. May.

<https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2019/05/07/turkeys-rights-in-east-med-unquestionable-erdogan-says>

³Taspinar, O. (2011) The Rise of Turkish Gaullism: Getting Turkish-American Relations Right, *Insight Turkey* 3, no. 1, pp: 11–17.

⁴Roy, S. (2011) The Kurdish Issue. *Foreign Policy Journal*, April.

<https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2011/04/22/the-kurdish-issue/>

⁵Alterman, J.B.; Conley, H.A.; Malka, H. & Ruy, D. (2018) Restoring the Eastern Mediterranean as a U.S. Strategic Anchor, *Center for Strategic International Studies*, May, pp 1-78.

⁶Borshchevskaya, A. & Vaughan, Ji J. (2016) How the Russian Military Reestablished Itself in the Middle East, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-the-russian-military-reestablished-itself-in-the-middle-east>

⁷Cyprus Signs Deal to Allow Russian Navy to Use Ports, BBC News, February 26, 2015,

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31632259>

⁸Paul Iddon, "Russia Expanding Middle East Footprint with Egypt Bases," *The New Arab*, December 15, 2017,

<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2017/12/15/russia-expanding-middle-east-footprint-with-egypt-bases>

develop energy resources in the region.⁹ However, due to both economic and diplomatic tensions between Ankara, Athens and Nicosia, the U.S. did not take into consideration Turkey in the development of the East Med Pipeline. In fact, while the U.S. promoted political support to Greece, Cyprus and Israel in order to keep alive the intention to create an alternative natural gas corridor in the region, Turkey opted to take part in the Russian project concerning the construction of a natural gas pipeline known as TurkStream.¹⁰

From the U.S. and the European Union's perspective, exploiting the hydrocarbon resources in Eastern Mediterranean region is an opportunity "to provide economic gains and contribute to energy security in the region and Europe, as well as support European efforts to diversify away from natural gas supplied by the Russian Federation."¹¹ Nonetheless, the U.S. should take into account that this region has a multitude of conflicting interests, emanating from several state and non-state actors, and that all of them have great potential to shape the future of Eastern Mediterranean region.

U.S. Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean

Over the past year, the above-mentioned tensions between Ankara and its neighbours have increased. Although the U.S. aspires to restore its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, it might be strategically convenient for Washington maintaining its position as neutral as possible and to juggle between two roles: a NATO's member state that considers Turkey as a strategic ally in the region, vital for the Southern flank of North Atlantic Alliance, and a partner to the EU that supports both Cyprus and Greece in developing a regional strategic cooperation. In order to do that, Washington might expect to face at least three urgent challenges in the region, involving both Turkey and its European allies.

1. Develop a solid plan for military cooperation with Cyprus and Greece

According to the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act, the bill proposes the transfer of \$3,000,000 to the Greek government for Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance and \$2,000,000 to both Greece and Cyprus for International Military Education and Training (IMET) support.

The U.S. investments in Greece and Cyprus appear to be mainly dictated by the latest developments concerning the military cooperation between Ankara and Moscow. Certainly, for Washington, it has never been a mystery that Turkey uses Russian manufactured military capabilities. Nonetheless, Ankara's decision to keep acquiring the S-400s from Russia, apparently one of the most sophisticated anti-aircraft weapon systems currently made, and the Turkish aspiration to procure MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) for further operations¹² provoked strong reactions among the EU

⁹Michael, R. "Natural Gas Discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean," Congressional Research Service, August 15, 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44591.pdf>

¹⁰Geropoulos, K. (2017) Political backing for pipeline to connect Israel's Leviathan and Cyprus' Aphrodite gas fields to Greece and Italy. *Energy & Russian Affairs Editor, New Europe*. <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/greece-cyprus-italy-israel-sign-mou-east-med-gas-pipeline/>

¹¹<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1102/text>

¹²Turkey and Russia cosy up over missiles. *The Economist*. May 2017.

<https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/05/04/turkey-and-russia-cosy-up-over-missiles>

member states in the region. For instance, the Greek Defense Minister, Evangelos Apostolakis, declared necessity for the regional balance of power, for which Athens should have access to new F-35s or, at least, to other similar aircraft to withstand the Turkish threat.¹³

From the U.S. side, Washington has already announced its intention not only to block any further transfer of F-35 to Turkey but also to remove Ankara from the F-35 Lightning II global aircraft program, causing significant damages to the Turkish economy. The Trump Administration has also expressed its willingness to strengthen both the Greek Air Force and the Cyprus Navy through the use of multinational simulations and exercises; also, in cooperation with Israel, Italy and the United Arab Emirates, a development that has already occurred in April 2019.¹⁴

The best course of action for the U.S. would be to identify and consolidate regional partnerships with the Eastern Mediterranean countries. Washington, in fact, is promoting a significant cooperation with Cyprus, due to its strategic proximity to the Middle East region and North Africa; it is also improving U.S.-Greek relations for the purpose of acquiring access to the Greek naval base called Navy Support Activity (NSA) Souda Bay for support and refuelling during international missions.¹⁵

Certainly, at first sight, this enhanced cooperation can be interpreted as provocative from the Turkish perspective. However, what it reveals is that the U.S. will continue to promote a strong collaboration with Cyprus, Greece and Israel insofar Ankara remains close to the Kremlin.

2. Establish a secure alternative energy hub in the Eastern Mediterranean

In 2009, the discovery of the first natural gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean led many actors to be seriously attracted to this region, and their interests increased more when, in the following years, the Leviathan and the Aphrodite fields were unearthed close to the Israeli and the Cypriot coasts respectively.

The U.S., particularly, recognized this discovery as a huge window of opportunity to strengthen its current relationships with some of the European Union's members, promote new partnerships and undermine the Russian grip on the European gas market. This is why, for many years, Washington has been supporting the construction of a Transatlantic Pipeline and it has been encouraging local energy explorations across the region with the cooperation of Israel, Greece and Cyprus and others.¹⁶ Consequently, due to the deterioration of the ties between Israel and Turkey during the Arab-Israeli conflict¹⁷, the U.S. can be reluctant to rely on Ankara in the establishment of a secure alternative

¹³Gurcan, M. (2019) Deteriorating US-Turkey ties weaken Ankara's hand in other problems. *Al Monitor*. May. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/05/turkey-united-states-is-greece-new-military-partner.html#ixzz5nKnb87k>

¹⁴Vallianos, M. & Vallianos, P. (2019) Hellenic Air Force: exercise Iniochos 2019 With the first participation of Italian Air Force F-35A Lightning II 5th generation fighters. *Aviation Report*. April. <http://en.aviation-report.com/hellenic-air-force-exercise-iniochos-2019/>

¹⁵Alterman, J.B.; Conley, H.A.; Malka, H. & Ruy, D. (2018) Restoring the Eastern Mediterranean as a U.S. Strategic Anchor, *Center for Strategic International Studies*, May, pp 1-78.

¹⁶Navon, E. (2019) The New Emerging Energy Hub in the Eastern Mediterranean. *The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security*. January. <https://jiss.org.il/en/navon-the-new-emerging-energy-hub-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>

¹⁷Efron, S. (2018) The Future of Israeli-Turkish Relations. *RAND Corporation*. Santa Monica, pp: 1-69.

energy hub in the Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara, in fact, thrice severed its diplomatic ties with Israel since the beginning of 2011¹⁸. The inability to find a point of agreement led the two countries to have a relation mainly characterized by different opinions and tensions. The breaking point was reached when, in May 2018, Israel Defense Forces killed many civilian Palestinians during a brutal conflict in Gaza that led Turkey to expel the Israeli ambassador from the country.¹⁹

Under these circumstances, the U.S. is fully aware that it is not in the position to create a secure energy hub in the Eastern Mediterranean without a regional partner for Israel. Therefore, since 2012, Washington has been encouraging a renewed Egypt-Israel cooperation.²⁰ Egypt is a centrepiece in the creation of a functioning local gas network. Between 2000 and 2010, the country became a large gas exporters and cultivated significant regional economic cooperation, thanks to the development of the Arab Gas Pipeline.²¹ In light of this, if the U.S. and EU manage to secure Cairo's support, they can stand a better chance of establishing an alternative gas pipeline.

3. Reinstate a bilateral U.S.-Turkish strategic dialogue

On the basis of the most recent developments, concerning the Turkish plan to drill on Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone²², it would be prudent for Washington to try to reinstate a strategic dialogue with Ankara to explore potential collaboration.

On one side, from the American perspective, reconstructing a positive partnership with Turkey would symbolize a victory in every respect. Firstly, it would represent a relevant step forward in strengthening the American influence in the region; secondly, it would allow Washington to guarantee Israel for a new local strategic partner; last, but not least, it would assist in containing the Russian expansion across the region, both from a military and an economic perspective.

On the other side, Ankara is aware that, considering the strong partnership between Washington and Tel Aviv, a definitive economic rupture with the U.S. would also reduce the possibility to cooperate with Israel on further gas conducts. In addition, as a member of NATO, Turkey is unable to tolerate a drastic separation with the U.S., since Ankara can use the military alliance as leverage vis-à-vis Moscow. On the basis of these conditions, the dialogue between the U.S. and Turkey might progress following the two specific phases.

As a first step, the two sides should find an accord on the U.S. decision to suspend delivery of F-35s to Turkey. Washington has justified this restriction as a national security matter, affirming that if F-35s fighters continue to operate in the zone covered by S-400 systems, it will be extremely critical for the stealth features of the vehicle. Essentially, the S-400 was created by Russia specifically to

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ <https://www.tv7israelnews.com/israel-views-egypt-as-strategic-energy-partner/>

²¹ EU Directorate-General for External Policies (2017) Energy: a shaping factor for regional stability in the Eastern Mediterranean? *Policy Department*. June.

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578044/EXPO_STU\(2017\)578044_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578044/EXPO_STU(2017)578044_EN.pdf)

²² Butler, D. (2019) U.S. and EU concerned by Turkey's plans to drill off Cyprus. *Reuters*.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-cyprus-drilling/us-and-eu-concerned-by-turkeys-plans-to-drill-off-cyprus-idUSKCN1SC0D5>

identify both F-35s and other similar aircraft very difficult to detect by radars and subsequently, destroy them.²³ For Turkey, therefore, the F-35/S-400 issue is at risk of spiralling out of control and the consequences could be critical. Ankara might receive severe sanctions from the U.S. for the acquisition of S-400s, inter alia losing the trust of one of its biggest military investors.

As a second step, the White House can encourage Turkey to strengthen their reciprocal trades, since the U.S. is the second foreign investor concerning Turkey's e-commerce, retail, technology, finance and energy²⁴. Nevertheless, to re-negotiate any trade/energy deal, it would be necessary that the relation between Israel and Turkey greatly improves; especially after that Ankara has condemned the Israeli bombing in Gaza as an act of terrorism²⁵.

Thus, what emerges is that the U.S. diplomatic, economic and security engagement in the Eastern Mediterranean region depends on a very transversal and integrated strategy, which is not so easy to accomplish. The Trump administration has to also deal with both local and foreign actors which possess significant influence to alter the fate of region in accordance with their own interests. But, according to that, a question rises spontaneously: is the cooperation between the U.S. and local actors really feasible?

Prospects for cooperation

Since January 2016, Athens, Nicosia and Tel Aviv have held summits to strengthen their strategic alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean. Although the predominant theme of those meetings referred to the discovery of further natural gas fields, the three countries' premiers also worked on the development of a closer cooperation, particularly in technology, research and security.²⁶ This multi-dimensional regional partnership, however, has never been exclusive. Washington has always encouraged Cairo to take part in this project as local supporters, both to increase the stability in the region and to increase the overall probability of success.

After the signature of the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act, the general feeling for collaboration was overwhelmingly positive. In fact, there are no significant obstacles to the U.S.-led cooperation except for Russia. Certainly, Turkey's difficult relations with Cyprus, Egypt, Israel and Greece make the issue more complicated both from an economic and a political viewpoint, but, as already mentioned, Ankara does not appear to be in the position to alter this new regional partnership, and there are two main reasons for that. Firstly, an aggressive Turkish approach towards Cyprus and Greece will destabilize the ties with the European Union both in terms of accession and foreign investment, since around 74% of Turkish foreign direct investments come from EU

²³ Taylor, J. (2019) The F-35 Dispute and Tensions in the U.S.-Turkey Relationship. *Lawfare*, May.

<https://www.lawfareblog.com/f-35-dispute-and-tensions-us-turkey-relationship>

²⁴Yinanc, B. (2019) Turkey, US seek better ties despite splits. *Daily News*. April.

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/barcin-yinanc/turkey-us-seek-better-ties-despite-splits-142686>

²⁵The Guardian (2019) Turkey condemns 'Israeli terrorism' for bombing news agency in Gaza.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/05/turkey-condemns-israeli-terrorism-for-bombing-news-agency-in-gaza>

²⁶Goren, N., Asseburg, M., Dokos, T., Eiran, E., Mitchell, G., & Tsakonas, P. (2018) The Eastern Mediterranean: new dynamics and potential for cooperation. *Joint policy study Euromesco*, pp:1-82.

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countries²⁷ Secondly, any Turkish military action against Cyprus and Greece would represent a direct attack on NATO. However, even if Turkey doesn't find a way to obstruct the new regional partnership, there are other factors at play, which raise concerns and scepticism in the construction of the East Med Pipeline. According to several experts, in fact, this Pipeline can become economically profitable only if the existing gas outlets for the Eastern Mediterranean will drain away.²⁸

Conclusion

The renewed presence of the U.S. in the Eastern Mediterranean has been guided both by economic and geo-political interests. Many states in the region are suffering from economic crises and local conflicts, and the increasing level of instability in the region has led external actors to intervene and secure their priorities.

Washington has mainly based its policy on the Eastern Mediterranean to create a new safer area for both NATO and non-NATO allies by providing them with new gas infrastructures, making them less dependent on natural gas fields supplied by Russia. Through the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act, the U.S. drops a solid and, most likely, permanent anchor in the region. The employment of military means has been fundamental for this objective, especially in terms of military support extended to both Greece and Cyprus and the use of army simulations, connecting the two European allies with other regional actors such as Israel, Egypt and also United Arab Emirates.

The U.S. involvement in Greek-, and Cypriot military capabilities might make Kremlin feel under threat and push Moscow to respond with countermeasures. At this stage, therefore, a further question arises: what is Moscow's next move in the Eastern Mediterranean? At first glance, it is reasonable to affirm that the Kremlin seems to be back in the game because, in April 2019, Russia strengthened its Navy with the arrival of new submarines both in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean.²⁹

²⁷Pierini, M.(2019) Turkey and the West: What to Expect in 2019?*Carnegie Europe*.January.
<https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/78205>

²⁸Tsafos, N. (2019) Can the East Med Pipeline Work? *Center for Strategic and International Studies*.January.
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/can-east-med-pipeline-work>

²⁹ Bodner, M. (2019) US rolls '100K tons of international diplomacy' into the Med. Will Russia get the message? *Defense News*, April.
<https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/navy-league/2019/04/26/us-rolls-100k-tons-of-international-diplomacy-into-the-med-will-russia-get-the-message/>

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