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The Eastern Mediterranean Trilateral Agreements: A Buffer for Geopolitical Challenges in the Region [1]

This article is the first in a three-part series by CPD Eastern Mediterranean Research Fellow Dionysos Alexiou, exploring the Eastern Mediterranean Trilateral Agreements.

The will to establish any form of cooperation between states is linked primarily to geographical proximity and secondarily to the needs arising from the fluidity of geopolitics. Contemporary history has demonstrated that in order to foil a crisis, foresight and acumen are required.

Countries in geographical proximity have forged trade relations and, therefore, cultural relations that went on to “enrich” peoples, as new forms of collaboration were brought to the fore. The Tripartite Cooperation Mechanisms established between Cyprus and Greece with states of their region, in particular Egypt, Israel and Jordan respectively, have precisely this purpose: to bring out the importance of geography for the benefit of all parties, and more broadly, of the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Based on reciprocity, mutual understanding and respect of cultural and religious diversity, and aiming at tackling common challenges, these tripartite coalitions are introducing a new modus operandi to the region’s foreign policy, one that foregrounds not only peace and stability, but also progress and prosperity of peoples through the signing of agreements of understanding, that delineate sectors of cooperation across a broad range of issues such as: provision of humanitarian aid, exchange of information regarding the prevention of terrorist attacks, exchange of know-how and collaboration on cybersecurity, joint – not unilaterally military – exercises focused mainly on search and rescue in the region with relation to illegal and instigated immigration, joint exploitation of natural gas and RES with the goal to enrich the energy mixture of both Cyprus and Greece so as to achieve the objectives of the Green Deal set by the European Commission and, therefore, improve the quality of life for the citizens.

There are recent specific examples that, beyond frequent dialogues between the heads of the cooperating states, add a new dimension to the relations between the countries involved: namely Cyprus and Greece with Egypt, Israel and Jordan. For each Mechanism there are visible results, applications and consequences mostly felt within civil society. In other words, these agreements at the highest political level carry weight in specific sectors like for instance a significant increase of tourism flows from Israel to Cyprus until recently, and Israeli investments on the island in several sectors; exchange of know-how with Egypt on matters of rural development, as well as exchange of expertise with Jordan regarding the protection of cultural heritage.

?he tripartite agreements, of which Cyprus is a part, appear successful on both targeted levels, bearing substantive fruit to date whilst also building a foundation for more meaningful future cooperation in the sectors mentioned above and analyzed further below, in spite of the

ebb and flow of the last four years (particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza). Both outcomes are tremendously beneficial. It is also worth noting that when it comes to development of regional cooperation mechanisms, the conversations are themselves meaningful markers of progress.

Eventually, it appears that these tripartite cooperations are important initiatives of foreign policy and reciprocity. They have also laid the foundations to deliver tangible results in terms of prosperity and progress, both at the social and economic level in the near future. With an eye to pursuing such tangible results, the Permanent Secretariat of Tripartite Mechanisms has been set up as an independent body seated in Nicosia, tasked with supervising and coordinating actions between the tripartite cooperation countries towards the materialization and completion of proposals and projects.

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Tripartite and/or Multilateral Cooperation Mechanisms

Geographic proximity as a solid fact and, by consequence, common problems and challenges or the shared desire for prosperity are major reasons to set up multilateral cooperations. However, before we analyze the achievements and potential of the Tripartite Mechanisms of Cooperation where Cyprus participates, and before we discuss their particular importance as to what has already been achieved as well as their potential for the near future, it might be helpful to cite, by way of introduction, specific examples of similar coalitions of Tripartite and Multilateral Mechanisms, whose very existence and operation provide insight into how emerging questions may be managed or how initiatives of sustainability, economic stability, prosperity and any form of solidarity and mutual support may materialize. These examples are intended to highlight specific developments and aspects which should be taken into account by the Cyprus-based Secretariat, but also by the contracting parties.

The discussion begins with the example of ASEAN + 3 and continues with the Tripartite Mechanism on Dialogue and Cooperation between the Republic of Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of South Africa.

On October 7, 2003, during the ASEAN + 3 Summit, a Joint Declaration was signed in Bali, Indonesia, on the Promotion of Tripartite Cooperation among the People's Republic of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. The Declaration was clear: "The tripartite cooperation is aimed at boosting development, strengthening East Asian cooperation and safeguarding peace and prosperity at the regional and global levels." In the six parts of the Declaration, the main objectives of the Cooperation were set forth, most importantly investment and cooperation in trade amongst the three countries, but also with other countries. The three cooperating countries have since focused on questions of science and technology, joint disaster management, shared educational programmes and exchanges, denuclearization, defence equipment, combatting economic crime, drug trafficking, protection of the environment, etc. The equivalent Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) was established in 2011 in Seoul and has acted as a hub for tripartite cooperation.

Today, the Secretariat is involved in as many as 29 fields of cooperation and serves as an

umbrella for more than seventy Consultative Mechanisms, whilst creating the conditions for the establishment of new cooperations. The main issues it manages pertain to political affairs, economic affairs, sustainable development, as well as the coordination of social and cultural projects in concert with local and international organizations. Educational diplomacy is also foregrounded: a common database for research and publications has been set up following communication and coordination between universities. It must be noted that TCS has a common budget for purposes of efficiency and effectiveness, with funding from the three cooperating countries.

The above example of Tripartite Mechanism of Cooperation contains important elements that serve as a basis for dialogue by the Eastern Mediterranean Mechanisms discussed here, such as the promotion of regional peace and stability but also collaboration in matters of sciences and technology, mostly between Cyprus, Greece and Israel -- and are included, pursued and repeated in the official press releases issued jointly at the summit meetings. Also, just like the countries in the ASEAN + 3 Mechanism, the agenda at the meetings where Cyprus participates includes topics about disaster management and search and rescue operations, mostly with Egypt. A particular aspect common in both Mechanisms of Cooperation (ASEAN +3 & Eastern Mediterranean) is the goal to protect the environment and tackle climate change; a case in point is the Tripartite Agreement for the protection of the Mediterranean's maritime environment and ways to deal with potential pollution as a result of carbohydrate extraction activities signed between Cyprus, Greece and Israel in 2016. Also, the recent initiative of the former President of Cyprus regarding regional action by the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, with special reference on the timely contribution of the Tripartite Mechanisms of Cooperation in dealing with the consequences of climate change, during the One Ocean Summit held in Brest, France, in February 2022.

The second example is the Tripartite Mechanism on Dialogue and Cooperation established in 2013 between the Republic of Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of South Africa. The objective is to support the consolidation of peace and stability in these sectors: (a) politics and diplomacy (b) defense, security and public order (c) economy, and (d) public administration and local government. The establishment of an Angola-based Permanent Secretariat was decided upon in October 2014 in order to coordinate and to serve as a vehicle for the three member-countries and to consolidate political and economic integration, aiming at stability in the region.

The collaborations in the Eastern Mediterranean appear to partially overlap with the specific example of the Mechanism of Cooperation in Africa in terms of the objectives of diplomatic contacts and initiatives aimed at regional peace and stability. After all, this is precisely the basis for the creation of the tripartite coalitions. They differ in that Cyprus and Greece, as EU member-states, cannot alter aspects of public administration, given that these aspects are associated with the form of government, constitutional provisions and relevant EU legislation. Nevertheless, the similarities clearly outnumber the differences. As will be shown in detail in the next chapter, the Mechanisms of Cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean were built around a major axis: the energy program. From there, they evolved into a multilevel contact between the countries across important sectors. This, in itself, makes them very relevant vis-à-vis their level of development, operation and importance to the present and future of the region.