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# The Eastern Mediterranean Trilateral Agreements: Tripartite Mechanisms of Cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean <sup>[1]</sup>

*This article is the second in a three-part series by CPD Eastern Mediterranean Research Fellow Dionysos Alexiou, exploring the Eastern Mediterranean Trilateral Agreements. **Part One** considered the role of the agreements as a buffer for geopolitical challenges in the region.*

This article overviews the Tripartite Mechanisms of Cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean and examines aspects proper to each Mechanism of Cooperation, while underlining elements that call for attention and delicate treatment, as they are capable of altering the structure and form of the Mechanisms.


The following presentation of each Mechanism of Cooperation indicates the initial main reason for the coalition and how it gradually developed to include additional sectors; in other words, how it evolved. Particular reference is made to the energy background and the potential that may arise. Following on from this last point, energy, we begin the discussion with the Mechanism of Cooperation between Cyprus-Greece and Egypt. Energy diplomacy has been the main cause for the development of this Mechanism, as most of the energy fields in Cyprus' EEZ, where significant natural gas deposits have been discovered, are bordering Egypt.

## **Cyprus-Greece + Egypt**

The agreements of the tripartite cooperation with Egypt pertain by and large to the countries' energy program and, consequently—given that two of the three countries are EU members—to the materialization of the objectives of the *Green Deal* vis-à-vis the integration of RES into the energy mixture. A case in point is the recent signing of a MoU on the electricity cross-border interconnection of the countries via the Euro-Africa Interconnector, clearly associated with EU energy security, following the relevant decisions taken against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Observers agree that the energy program is in fact the most emblematic aspect of this cooperation.

At the same time, during the Summit in Athens, in late 2021, the joint fight against terrorism and illegal immigration were discussed, as well as mutual support of countries regarding vaccination programmes, questions of tourism, agriculture, fish farming, protection of (underwater) cultural heritage, the options to exploit and dispose of natural gas, the Libyan crisis, and peace-making procedures towards mitigating the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, whereas special reference was made on the Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia.

An important topic on the agenda at every Summit is cutting off migration flows/human trafficking flows with the engagement of Egypt and with assistance from the EU. This specific aspect may bring mutual benefit and stability to the Eastern Mediterranean regarding

migration flows, in alignment with key priorities of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Significantly, ENP funding, through the new NDICI (Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument) strategy -EU External Action  - has been boosted by 2 billion Euro for the period between 2021-2027.


Through these agreements but also through its independent energy policy, Egypt appears to have become a hub in the wider region. The maintenance and upgrade of existing facilities, the giant Zohr gas field, but also control of the Suez Canal have added to the country's role and strategic position in the area. At the same time, the multilevel policy of President al-Sisi, both in the interior of the country with various investment projects underway vis-à-vis the country's energy program, and also regarding Egypt's balancing role in the Organization of the Islamic Conference and between the Arab countries, provides a stabilising pillar in the wider region, as it implicitly serves the surrounding countries (Jordan, Israel, Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia) by maintaining harmonious and friendly relations. The role of Egypt is particularly important for the sustainability of the Tripartite Agreements, but also because it confers credibility on the Cooperation within the international community. An important example across time is the international support of a solution to the Cyprus problem based on the decisions of the UN Security Council, as well as Egypt's reaction against the illegal Turkish-Libyan Maritime Memorandum which is contrary to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, illegally bisecting the bordering EEZs of Egypt and Greece with a goal – among other things – to dispatch weapons to Libya and involve Turkey in the region.

### **Cyprus-Greece + Jordan**

The tripartite cooperation with Jordan is mostly concerned with skill development and digital transformation, but also with issues of cultural heritage, a significant aspect in which contracting parties are particularly interested. In fact, in the framework of the Nicosia Summit (January 2018), a relevant Agreement was signed on the prevention of theft, clandestine excavation and illicit import, export or transfer of ownership of cultural property and the promotion of its restitution, in addition to mutual understanding for the protection and preservation of UNESCO world heritage sites. Also, during the latest Tripartite Meeting in Athens, the heads of states focused on questions of culture, education, trade, food security, tourism, energy, agriculture, the environment, healthcare, investments.

Also discussed was the solution to the Cyprus problem, with the agreement that it must be based on the decisions of the UN Security Council, and with respect to the Law of the Sea. The three countries agreed on initiatives to counter terrorism, and supported the initiative of Aqaba Process (NATO, 2020) regarding misuse of the Internet and of social media by terrorist groups. Furthermore, the three leaders took a position in support of reconstructing worn-torn areas in Iraq and in favor of a solution in Syria and Libya based on the decisions of the Security Council. Topics that touch upon the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership (Euromed) and of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) were also on the agenda.

### **Cyprus-Greece + Israel**

The tripartite cooperation with Israel explores a wider potential for collaboration between Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, given the normalization of relations  through the *Abraham Accords*, which additionally give rise to possible collaboration with Gulf countries and countries in North Africa. The aim is to create a new Mechanism for stability and promotion of socioeconomic interests. At the same time, during the unofficial meeting of the

three countries in Pafos in April 2020, in the framework of *Philia Forum*, representatives of the UAE (3+1) were also invited, which suggests the intention of collaboration but also the desire to expand the Tripartite Mechanism. All four countries agreed with respect to the International Law/Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), on stability in the wider region and on unimpeded foreign policy of the contracting parties, particularly of the Republic of Cyprus. These initiatives and, additionally, Cyprus' excellent relations with the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, show that the island, both as an EU member-state and as a partner in the Tripartite Mechanisms of Cooperation is a significant pillar of the EU's Southern Neighborhood, and could become a platform for exchange of views and ways to settle future problems in the wider region.

At the penultimate Summit of the Tripartite Mechanism of Cooperation, it was agreed to combat terrorism, condemning terrorist financing and arming by specific countries. There was mutual understanding for jointly combatting diseases in the future, applying expertise and technology, whereas special reference was made to energy issues (exploitation of natural gas, RES, Euro-Asia Interconnector) and of green growth, as well as of the East-Med Gas Forum, having as overarching aim to cooperatively combat climate change. As far as the Euro-Asia Interconnector is concerned (to operate in 2025), it is worth noting that the aim is transmission capacity of 1000MW at an initial stage and, subsequently, of 2000MW. This initiative is an alternative transmission of electric power from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe, which upgrades Cyprus on the energy map as connecting country between two continents. Particularly for Cyprus, the project will provide energy security and a way out of energy isolation. The aim is for the country to surpass its objectives regarding the percentage addition of RES to its energy mixture.

What are the recent facts? Remarks made at the latest meeting between the Foreign Ministers of the three countries in Nicosia (late March 2023) and, more specifically, references on the development/expansion of the tripartite cooperation suggest an intention for U.S.A. involvement (3+1) in questions of common interest and questions about stability in the region. At the recent Nicosia meeting between the leaders of Cyprus, Greece and Israel in early September 2023, the close collaboration between the countries was reaffirmed, as well as the possibility to expand the coalition by inviting India to join. The leaders focused on the energy sector and agreed that natural gas and RES are a primary pillar of cooperation in the region, particularly in light of recent geographical developments and energy insecurity, mostly in Europe, that dictate the need for alternative energy sources and increased interconnectivity. The leaders also reaffirmed their strong attachment to the 3+1 Mechanism of Cooperation with the USA. What is more, the Greek prime minister underlined aspects of political protection and the need for Israel to participate in European initiatives through a focus on technology and the implementation of artificial intelligence.

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