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The Eastern Mediterranean Trilateral Agreements: Achievements and Potential ^[1]

*This article is the third 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. **Part Two** overviewed the Tripartite Mechanisms of Cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean and examined each Mechanism in detail.*

The current interstate challenges in the wider region—regional security, proliferation of weapons, climate change, food security, sea safety, immigration, public health etc.—demonstrate that the maintenance and/or expansion of Tripartite Cooperations, the effective operation of the East-Med Gas Forum, the excellent relations of the Republic of Cyprus with the Middle East countries but also, trading carefully, collaboration with the countries that have signed the Abraham Accords (also given the Negev Forum), and the countries participating in the Baghdad Conference, are all coming together to complete a favorable puzzle for mutual collaboration and progress. And—why not?—the creation of a new regional organization, equivalent to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN and ASEAN ISIS), and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) could be contemplated in the future.

To some, this idea may seem like “a midsummer night’s dream” because of “traditional” instability in the wider region (the long war in Syria, the war in Lebanon, protests in Egypt in the wake of the Arab Spring, the war raging in Gaza); but the tripartite cooperations prove that they can give food for thought towards this possibility—of course, after peace is brought to the region. The best example that can be mentioned is that Cyprus, precisely because of the specific Mechanisms of Cooperation and the trust that has been built, has been the only country allowed to dispatch humanitarian aid to Gaza through Egypt. More particularly, on January 2, a ship carrying 87 tons of humanitarian aid reached Port Said where it was received by the Egyptian Red Crescent and from there was taken to Rafah in Gaza by road. The distribution of the aid was undertaken by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Be that as it may, it is believed that through agreed or independently proposed (by each party involved) confidence building measures, bound to afford mutual benefits (in terms of the economy and energy), the creation of a broader organization of regional cooperation can be put to the table. An initial form could lean upon common challenges that do not make part of priorities nor do they require imminent action. Oftentimes, what is considered a secondary topic in current agendas becomes primary and exceptionally important in the near future; only then do we understand the circularity of challenges.


As for the Cyprus-based Secretariat of Tripartite Mechanisms, perhaps every party to the cooperation has its own agenda and, because of this, the Secretariat cannot play a leading

role but rather coordinates unilaterally the contacts of each Mechanism. Nevertheless, there is certainly room for growth and maturity. Nevertheless, for the sake of the Secretariat's productivity, a good start would be to take on and materialize some of the initiatives set forth and analysed herein below.

Also, in spite of great potential, there seems to be potential at the level of educational diplomacy, more particularly in university collaboration. Targeted initiatives could foster the establishment of joint programmes, the foundation of research centres in Cyprus—conveniently located between the cooperating countries—and the funding of projects involving the academic community of the cooperating states. What is more, specific syllabi could include the (modern) history of the countries. At the same time, the Dialogue Committees, as part of the tripartite contacts, could focus on the dynamics and the important role of the diaspora as a way to extend cooperations abroad. One aspect that deserves to be advanced is the enrichment of the academic program of the Diplomatic Academy for diplomatic attachés, with an educational programme that includes aspects of the historicity of the cooperating countries.

In addition—and in particular—the Permanent Secretariat of Tripartite Mechanisms should focus on the following initiatives that will bring a new significant dimension to the relations between the four cooperating countries, while creating at the same time a potential of regionalism required in the Eastern Mediterranean.

First, establish National Social Dialogue Institutions (NSDI) whereby topics such as Green Transition could be discussed at a regional level, beyond the EU Regulatory Framework determined by the Green Deal, in the form of exchange of views on tackling difficulties and obstacles at institutional level but also on the basis of an effective implementation of measures through a fair transition. This particular aspect also touches on Cyprus' energy-related cooperation with the cooperating countries, for instance, regarding Renewable Energy Sources, the exploitation of natural gas reserves, and electricity connection through the Euro-Asia/Euro-Africa Interconnectors. However, the major advantage that Cyprus could obtain from the operation of NSDI is a discussion on how social dialogue unfolds in the cooperating countries (Greece, Egypt, Israel, Jordan) and on which Mechanisms can be utilised on a shared basis.


Also, from time to time, during summit or ministerial meetings between the cooperating countries, the establishment of a Future of Work Tripartite Forum  could be examined, in the way it operates in New Zealand, where labour questions could be discussed.

What is more, a “Regional Center of Public Diplomacy” could operate within the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, as well as a “Directorate for Cultural Diplomacy,” responsible for cultural exchanges between countries, and also for expertise aimed at improving the equivalent *nation brand*.

Additionally, efforts at cooperation, involving the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, with COMESA (The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa), EAC (East Africa Community), and SADC (Southern African Development Community) could be oriented towards further development of regional trade on the basis of bilateral agreements, but also of the relevant European legislation regarding fair trade and competition.

Joint creation and promotion of a campaign titled “Visit Eastern Mediterranean,” for example,

could be aimed at exchanges of citizens between the cooperating countries at the level of tourism, professional training, culture, expertise, patenting. Similarly, a "Youth Forum" could be organized, possibly in Cyprus, to host discussions of common issues of concern to young people, with an eye toward creating partnerships and exchanging views. In this context, exchange and mobility programmes for high school and university students can be set up, similar to the Erasmus programme. A "Forum for Future Leaders" could also be set up, with annual fellowships enabling young people to acquire leadership skills through workshops and training (either distance learning or on a residency basis).

With an eye toward fostering culture and cultural heritage, the institution of "Cultural Cities" could be created within the cooperating countries, and a regional medical center could be built, devoted to the development and dissemination of vaccines in collaboration with the EU Hera  programme, so that the cooperating countries can contribute to combatting future health emergencies.

By analogy to the establishment and operation of the East-Med Gas Forum, East-Med Agriculture Forum, East-Med Culture & Art Forum, and East-Med Digital Forum could be established, having as participants countries from the wider region (+UAE). What is more, the institution Eastern Mediterranean/Regional Paralympic Games could be established, featuring athletes from the cooperating countries, without excluding athletes from the signatories of the Abraham Accords.

Finally, in collaboration with the Foundation for Parliamentarianism and Participatory Democracy recently established by the House of Representatives, "Track One and a Half" and/or "Track Two Diplomacy" or "backchannel diplomacy" could be practiced with active participation from non-governmental/non-state actors.

Concluding this three-part article we would like to underline that it is crucial to sustain the Mechanisms of Cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean, as they constitute a token of stability and a model of coexistence in the region. Beyond the emblematic aspects of each Cooperation Mechanism, the fact that the Republic of Cyprus has been the only trusted party to be allowed to dispatch humanitarian aid to Gaza through Egypt is proof that these Mechanisms are truly important, and that Cyprus does play a decisive role.

Through tripartite cooperations, Cyprus has so far been able to upgrade its role and credibility at a regional and international level and has already engaged in "constructive contribution" with genuine interest in the region.
