

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN ALLIANCES: HOW ROBUST ARE THEY?

Troubled relations with Turkey have deepened the relations between three Eastern Mediterranean countries, Egypt, Cyprus and Greece. A fourth, Israel, is never too far off, with a now well-established Israel-Cyprus-Greece entente in parallel. Even if just for the image, Egypt prefers to adopt a discreet approach in relation to Israel.

After welcoming the President of Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades, and the Prime Minister of Greece Antonis Samaras, in Cairo on November 08, 2014, President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi headed to Cyprus for a second trilateral summit on April 29, 2015, with his Cypriot counterpart and Greek PM Alexis Tsipras. The Latter offered to host the third trilateral summit in Athens. Building on the “Cairo Declaration”, the three countries reasserted, in Nicosia, their will to strengthen economic cooperation (particularly in the fields of energy and merchant shipping) and solidify their political alliance (particularly with regard to security, defense and combatting terrorism). When it comes to energy, it was announced, on the same day, that the Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Company (EGAS) is negotiating to import roughly 700 mcf gas per day from Aphrodite (keeping in mind that the plan for developing Aphrodite involves an FPSO producing 800 mmcf of gas per day). Gas will be transported via a pipeline that would be completed “within two and a half to three years”.

The news has angered Turkey. Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yildiz, who believes the Egyptian option is not feasible in current market conditions, went as far as saying that the decision amounts to “political obstinacy” and was taken purposefully so as not to pass the gas via Turkey.

In parallel, President Anastasiades visited Israel on June 14-15, 2015, with the aim to build a strategic partnership with Israel. Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras will also visit Israel in August and a trilateral meeting, bringing together the leaders of Cyprus, Greece and Israel, is expected to be held later this year. Over the past few years, relations between the three countries have drastically improved, based on a shared perception of security threats and energy interests. Large-scale search and rescue exercises and joint military exercises improving interoperability

have multiplied since 2011. Coordination between the navies to deter maritime threats, particularly those associated with platform attacks, is also being improved. The three countries also hope to boost energy cooperation. In 2013, Cyprus, Greece and Israel signed an MoU to strengthen energy cooperation and protect important infrastructure. The Memorandum also includes a joint declaration of intent to lay an undersea electric cable linking Israel, Cyprus and Greece (Crete). The Euro-Asia Interconnector was among the topics discussed during President Anastasiades' visit to Israel. However, the three countries have yet to translate their political wishes into actual projects.

Prospects for these partnerships?

The foundations of these emerging partnerships are not as robust as they would appear at first, the rationale behind them being the troubled relationship each of these countries hold with Turkey, *at this point in time*. A possible improvement in relations with Turkey would relativize the importance of these partnerships.

In **Cyprus**, there is a growing optimism over the possibility of settling the Cyprus problem. The election of Mustafa Akinci – seen as a moderate – as President of the (unrecognized) Northern Cyprus, on April 26, has opened the way for resuming negotiations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and brought hope, for the first time in years, that the Cyprus problem can actually be settled. If progress is indeed recorded, it would result in an improvement in Cypriot-Turkish relations. In fact, even the simple prospect of a possible settlement has brought back on the table the Turkish option as one of the options to monetize Cypriot gas, even faster than negotiators.

In **Greece**, traditional animosity towards Turkey is also restrained by pragmatism. Turkey is Greece's largest trading partner, and Athens is seeking an extension of the Russian energy corridor, Turkish Stream, to the Greek borders, making Greece a hub between Turkey and the European gas markets.

As for **Israel**, and despite harsh rhetoric at the political level, Turkish-Israeli trade has reached unprecedented levels, and has more than doubled in the past five years. The boom is particularly remarkable in the context of global economic difficulties. On June 22, it was announced that the two countries have renewed reconciliation talks in a secret meeting in Rome.

For its part, **Egypt** still maintains difficult relationships with Ankara since the ousting of former President Mohammad Morsi. Saudi Arabia, a common ally, is seeking to improve relations between the two countries, with no significant results to date, but the Saudis seem determined to pursue their efforts.

Solid partnerships require more robust foundations, which do not solely rely on circumstantial factors, but on a strategic vision. The nature of gas discoveries in the Levant basin so far does not provide the countries in question with full autonomy in the exploitation and monetization of their resources, and impose a minimum of cooperation between neighboring countries to exploit these resources. An effective energy cooperation requires a long-term stabilization of political relations, not just a partnership based on provisional circumstances and positions vis-à-vis a third state at a certain point in history. The opposite is also true: the fact that these countries have to cooperate to exploit their resources is also a strong incentive to stabilize political relations. Whether this will happen or not is another story, as other factors come into play.

Lebanon

When looking at these eastern Mediterranean partnerships, it is easy to notice two countries are left out. Turkey, the first and – safe to say – *only* one concerned by these alignments, in addition to Lebanon.

As a result, some, in Lebanon, appear to be tempted to conclude that a Turkish-Lebanese rapprochement could be the answer to counter these emerging partnerships in the region. But, with an enemy at the southern border, and a Syria mired in conflicts at the northern and eastern borders (with obvious implications for trade and future cross-border projects) Lebanon is not in a position to pick and choose its friends. Lebanon would gain more by pursuing a parallel track to strengthen its bilateral relations with Turkey, Cyprus, Greece and Egypt, so as not to be overrun by a possible improvement of relations between these countries at a later stage.