

Revisiting the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Cyprus and Quasi-Alliances in the Eastern Mediterranean

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Abstract

The Eastern Mediterranean has emerged as a significant geopolitical region in the 21st century, influenced by both intra-regional dynamics and the strategic interests of international powers. The Republic of Cyprus (RoC)—a small State within this region—has endeavoured to adapt to the evolving international landscape and promote its own strategic interests. This paper examines the RoC's foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly its involvement in regional cooperation and the formation of quasi-alliances. The primary focus is twofold: situating the RoC's foreign policy within the international-regional nexus (particularly US policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and US–RoC relations), and assessing its strategic objectives and priorities. The analysis revisits the formation of quasi-alliances, such as the Israel–Cyprus–Greece and Egypt–Cyprus–Greece partnerships, and regional networks of cooperation. The key questions addressed include the success of RoC policy since the early 2010s, the positives and negatives of its approach, and the preconditions for a more effective foreign policy. The paper concludes that, despite notable progress, the RoC's foreign policy suffers from a lack of vision, strategic planning, and institutional capacities, making it vulnerable to domestic politics, populist rhetoric, and geopolitical shifts.

Keywords: Cyprus; foreign policy; quasi-alliances; US foreign policy; Eastern Mediterranean

Introduction

The 21st century has been one of tectonic and fast-paced geopolitical changes, both at the international and regional levels. While the world is trying to 'settle' into a stable and ideally peaceful post-Cold War order, balances of power remain in flux and regional conflicts break out even as normative changes are also taking place with concepts like democracy, security, human rights, international law, and truth being

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reframed.² Amidst this volatile environment, it has become increasingly difficult for States, and more so for smaller States, to navigate international affairs and find their place.³ Especially since the early 2010s, foreign policy implementation has become arguably more about adaptability to fluid global dynamics than rigid commitment to traditional positions and orientations.⁴ And yet, unsurprisingly, some States are in a better position to adapt than others, insofar as their power components, capacities, capabilities, and political leadership can mitigate the impact that exogenous forces have on their interests and policies.⁵ This is true both for the great powers who compete for an agenda-setting role in the formation of the new international order and for the ‘microcosm’ of geopolitical (sub)regions that have also emerged as more useful levels of analysis in recent years.⁶

The Eastern Mediterranean is one of those geopolitical spaces that acquired a rather distinct identity within the transitioning international order of the 21st century.⁷ This is not least because of several endogenous (intra-regional) developments affecting the patterns of enmity and amity among regional States, and the Eastern Mediterranean’s place and role in the plans of greater—extra-regional and international—powers.⁸ As a small State in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) has tried to adapt to new international realities while furthering its

² See e.g., Robert Jervis & al. (eds), *Chaos Reconsidered: The Liberal Order and the Future of International Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023); Rhys Crilly, ‘International relations in the age of ‘post-truth’ politics’, (2018) 94(2) *International Affairs*.

³ Giampiero Giacomello and Bertjan Verbeek, ‘Introduction: Middle Powers as the Ugly Ducklings of International Relations Theory’ in Giampiero Giacomello and Bertjan Verbeek (eds), *Middle Powers in Asia and Europe in the 21st Century*, (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2020) 1-8; Håkan Edström, Dennis Gyllensporre and Jacob Westberg, *Military Strategy of Small States: Responding to External Shocks of the 21st Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019) 1-13; Constantinos Adamides and Petros Petrikos, ‘Small European states in the hybrid warfare era: The cases of Cyprus, Malta, and Estonia’, (2023) 6(1) *Small States & Territories*.

⁴ Jochen Prant and Evelyn Goh, ‘Rethinking strategy and statecraft for the twenty-first century of complexity: a case for strategic diplomacy’, (2022) 98(2) *International Affairs* 444.

⁵ Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, ‘Power in International Politics’, (2005) 59 *International Organization*.

⁶ Rick Fawn, ‘Regions’ and their study: wherefrom, what for and whereto?’, (2009) 35 *Review of International Studies* 5-10.

⁷ Yannis A. Stivachtis, ‘Eastern Mediterranean: A New Region?’ in Spyridon N. Litsas and Aristotle Tziampiris (eds), *The New Eastern Mediterranean: Theory, Politics and States in a Volatile Era*, (Cham: Springer, 2019).

⁸ Aristotle Tziampiris, ‘The New Eastern Mediterranean as a Regional Subsystem’ in Spyridon N. Litsas and Aristotle Tziampiris (eds), *The New Eastern Mediterranean: Theory, Politics and States in a Volatile Era*, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019); Zenonas Tziarras, *The Eastern Mediterranean: Between Pow-*

own interests. As such, both the RoC and the Eastern Mediterranean have drawn increasing attention. This newfound interest has proliferated quickly, producing an extensive body of literature within the last 15 years.⁹ Drawing on and contributing to those debates, this paper's primary aim is twofold. First, to situate the foreign policy of the RoC towards the Eastern Mediterranean within the international-regional nexus, including the processes of regional cooperation, in which the RoC is both an actor and stakeholder in the contemporary security architecture of the region. Second, to assess the RoC's foreign policy in relation to its strategic objectives and priorities. To that end and given that the focus of the analysis is the regional level, the paper also revisits the quasi-alliances (or trilateral partnerships) in the Eastern Mediterranean and their contribution to networks of broader regional cooperation from today's vantage point. The most advanced partnerships are those among Israel, Cyprus, and Greece, and Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece, as well as the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which was established in 2020.

The main question to address is: Has the RoC's Eastern Mediterranean policy since the early to mid-2010s and the formation of the 'quasi-alliances', been successful? Second, what are the positives and negatives that can be identified in the RoC's policy and handling of these relationships? And ultimately, what are the preconditions for a more effective RoC foreign policy? The paper starts with a section that dis-

er Struggles and Regionalist Aspirations (Re-Imagining the Eastern Mediterranean Series: PCC Report, 2018).

⁹ See e.g., Zenonas Tziarras, 'Israel-Cyprus-Greece: A 'Comfortable' Quasi-Alliance', (2016) 21(3) Mediterranean Politics; James Roberts, 'Avenues for Cooperation between Turkey, the EU and the US in Regard to Eastern Mediterranean Energy.', (2013) US-Europe-Turkey Trialogue; Constantinos Adamides and Odysseas Christou, 'Energy Security and the Transformation of Regional Securitization Relations in the Eastern Mediterranean' in Savvas Katsikides and Pavlos Koktsidis (eds), *Societies in Transition: The Social Implications of Economic, Political and Security Transformations*, (New York: Springer, 2015); Spyridon N. Litsas, 'War, Peace and Stability in the Era of Multipolarity: What Lies at the End of the Systemic Rainbow' in Spyridon N. Litsas and Aristotle Tziampiris (eds), *The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition: Multipolarity, Politics and Power*, (New York: Routledge, 2015) ; Andrea Prontera and Mariusz Ruszel, 'Energy Security in the Eastern Mediterranean', (2017) 24(3) Middle East Policy; Jon B. Alterman, Heather A. Conley and Donatienne Ruy, *Restoring the Eastern Mediterranean as U.S. Strategic Anchor* (New York: CSIS, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Spyridon N. Litsas and Aristotle Tziampiris (eds), *The New Eastern Mediterranean: Theory, Politics and States in a Volatile Era* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019); Zenonas Tziarras (ed), *The New Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral Partnerships and Regional Security* (Re-Imagining the Eastern Mediterranean Report Series: PCC Report 3, Nicosia: PRIO Cyprus Centre, 2019); Zenonas Tziarras, 'International Competition and Cooperation in the new Eastern Mediterranean', (2021) Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies; Andreas Stergiou, Kivanc Ulusoy and Menahem Blondheim (eds), *Conflict and Prosperity: Geopolitics and Energy in the Eastern Mediterranean* (New York: Israel Academic Press, 2017).

cusses the formation of quasi-alliances from a theoretical and empirical point of view, including the RoC's involvement. The next section focuses on the nexus between the international and regional level of analysis. It examines how regional developments are connected to broader shifts in the international system and focuses on the increasing integration of the RoC into the United States' (US) efforts for a pro-Western security architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The final section discusses the RoC's strategic choices and foreign policy conduct thus far vis-à-vis its national interests and identifies the preconditions for a more optimal foreign policy.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. On the qualitative side, it employs discourse analysis, process-tracing, and elite interviews. These are complemented by the quantitative method of content analysis. The analysis relies heavily on process-tracing, namely, the methodological approach that examines the steps and mechanisms by which initial conditions lead to specific outcomes, focusing on the decision-making process itself.¹⁰ 'The simplest variety of process-tracing takes the form of a detailed narrative or story presented in the form of a chronicle that purports to throw light on how an event came about'.¹¹ In this paper, it is used to identify the ways through which (a) quasi-alliances were formed in the Eastern Mediterranean; (b) the RoC's foreign policy shifted during the 2010s; and (c) the Eastern Mediterranean developments became intertwined with changes in the global and regional strategic focus of the US. In this context, a limited number of interviews provide valuable information that complement the narrative. Moreover, content analysis, 'the classification and counting of data',¹² is applied especially to key US National Security Strategy (NSS) documents. Content patterns identified across these documents substantiate the growing US interest in the Eastern Mediterranean and reveal its correlation with the RoC's shift toward a pro-Western foreign policy orientation. However, content analysis is not made in isolation from context, as is often the criticism about this method. Rather, it is combined with discourse analysis and process-tracing to produce better inferences¹³ about the association between US

¹⁰ Alexander L. George and Timothy J. McKeown, 'Case Studies and Theories of Organizational Decision Making' in Robert F. Coulam and Richard A. Smith (eds), *Advances in Information Processing in Organizations, Vol 2*, (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1985) 35.

¹¹ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 2005) 210.

¹² Peter John, 'Quantitative Methods' in David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (eds), *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, (2nd edn, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995, 2002) 218.

¹³ Peter Burnham & al., *Research Methods in Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 241.

foreign policy and Eastern Mediterranean geopolitical shifts, and the meaning that the former ascribes to the latter—including to the RoC. The same is true for the evaluation of content, discourse, and meaning when the discourse and implementation of the RoC's foreign policy is assessed in relation to its objectives, capabilities, and success. In this respect, content and discourse analysis also provides a foundation for understanding the role of quasi-alliances as flexible, strategic responses to shifting geopolitical priorities. After all, it is widely maintained that 'language and discourses [...] frame and constrain given courses of actions', which is what discourse analysis aims to unpack.¹⁴ As explained below, these methods also differentiate this paper's approach from a traditional neorealist or structure-oriented analysis.

Ultimately, the paper argues that, despite the new openings and significant progress that the RoC's foreign policy accomplished in the 21st century and particularly since the early 2010s, a great lack of vision, strategic planning, and institutional capacities can be identified. This renders the RoC's foreign policy susceptible to domestic politics and populist rhetoric, as well as more vulnerable to systemic constraints and geopolitical shifts.

Quasi-Alliances and the RoC in the Eastern Mediterranean

What Is a Quasi-Alliance?

To revisit the Eastern Mediterranean quasi-alliances and the RoC's foreign policy, we first need to review, if briefly, the distinction between the concepts 'alliance' and 'quasi-alliance'. Alliances are extensively analysed in International Relations literature and particularly neorealism. The latter focuses on why States form alliances and the dynamics that govern them. More specifically, it posits that, because the international system is anarchic, meaning no central authority dictates the actions of sovereign States, States must rely on their own capabilities to ensure their survival and security. Two neorealist theories are relevant to this discussion. On the one hand, Kenneth Waltz's 'balance of power' theory suggests that States form alliances as a defensive mechanism—to counterbalance the power of other States and prevent any one State from dominating the system.¹⁵ Alliances are thus formed based on the distribution of power and are intended to ensure that no single State or coalition can impose its will on others. On the other hand, Stephen Walt's 'balance of threat' theory—a refinement

¹⁴ Ibid., 242.

¹⁵ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, Inc., 2010) 118, 166.

of the 'balance of power' theory—suggests that alliances are formed not merely based on the distribution of power, but on the perceived threat that other States pose as well.¹⁶ This includes considerations of geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and the perceived intentions of potential adversaries. Having said that, the States comprising an alliance may not only serve common or identical interests but also complementary or ideological ones.¹⁷ In this sense, both common and individual interests may motivate the formation of an alliance. Moreover, it should be noted that, according to the neoclassical strand of realism, alliances may not remain limited to the objectives of security and survival but also aim at the generation of profit. In other words, these objectives are not mutually exclusive and may be pursued simultaneously.¹⁸

The literature on quasi-alliances is not as developed as that on traditional alliances, while the concept remains somewhat contested. According to one definition, a quasi-alliance is formed by 'two states that are un-allied but share a third great power patron as a common ally'.¹⁹ Sun Degang, on the other hand, defines it as a 'permanent or ad hoc informal security co-operation arrangement, based not only on formal collective defense pacts, but on tacit agreements between two or among more international regimes'.²⁰ The two definitions seem to have parallel trajectories in the literature. However, the latter has been applied to other cases as well²¹ and remains more relevant to the Eastern Mediterranean context.

¹⁶ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987) 5.

¹⁷ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Brief & Revised edn, New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1993) 198-99; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

¹⁸ Randal L. Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back in', (1994) 19(1) *International Security* 82.

¹⁹ Victor Cha, 'Abandonment, entrapment, and neoclassical realism in Asia: The United States, Japan, and Korea', (2000) 44(2) *International Studies Quarterly* 262. See also, Resi Qurrata Aini and Yandry Kurniawan, 'Quasi-Alliance at Play: The Curious Case of South Korea's Aborted Withdrawal from GSOMIA in 2019', (2021) 24(3) *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik*; and, Won-June Hwang, 'Quasi-Alliance explanation for the fluctuating ROK-Japan relationship: analysing friction in 2019 and cohesion in 2023', (2024) *Asian Journal of Political Science*.

²⁰ Sun Degang, 'Brothers indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance revisited', (2009) 3(2) *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* 68.

²¹ See, Özden Zeynep Oktav, 'The Syrian Uprising and the Iran-Turkey-Syria Quasi Alliance: A View from Turkey' in Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür (eds), *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, (Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013) 194-95; Frederick Kliem, 'Why Quasi-Alliances will Persist in the Indo-Pacific? The Fall and Rise of the Quad', (2020) 7(3) *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*

Drawing upon Degang's definition and its previous application to the Eastern Mediterranean,²² we could say that, unlike the formal, often treaty-bound alliances emphasised in traditional neorealist theory, quasi-alliances lack formal agreements and are characterised by informal and flexible arrangements. There are little to no binding commitments—particularly as regards the mutual defence of the parties—that compel States to act in certain ways, allowing greater diplomatic flexibility. Indeed, while traditional alliances might involve military commitments or obligations to come to the aid of allies under attack,²³ quasi-alliances usually lack such deep military integration and are characterised by cooperation that is more political and economic than military. As such, quasi-alliances allow for a high degree of non-exclusivity as well. States in a quasi-alliance can maintain more independent foreign policies, including relationships with adversaries of their quasi-allies. This ambiguity allows States to navigate complex international relations without firmly committing to a single bloc. Moreover, whereas neorealism often highlights security threats as the primary motivator for alliances, quasi-alliances also strongly consider economic and political opportunities. These alliances can be as much about leveraging mutual benefits from cooperation (like energy resources or economic projects) as they are about countering common threats. For all the above reasons, quasi-alliances are also easier to form, modify, or dissolve as they do not involve the extensive bureaucratic and political processes that formal alliances do. This flexibility is particularly useful in regions where political dynamics and threats are rapidly changing, such as the Eastern Mediterranean. When it comes to the RoC in particular, this view converges, for example, with that of Alyson J. K. Bailes et. al., who argue that small States have unique alliance motivations and behaviours—including not only security but also political, economic, and societal stability—that traditional alliance theories often fail to capture. The authors conceptualise this small State strategy as an 'alliance shelter', which is seen as providing support in areas where small States are particularly vulnerable due to limited resources and capacity;²⁴ that is, not unlike the RoC's strategic

²² Tziarras, 'Israel-Cyprus-Greece: A 'Comfortable' Quasi-Alliance'.

²³ Apart from NATO and Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the go-to example of a formal alliance, another is the one concluded between Greece and France in 2021. See, Elie Perot, 'A new alliance in Europe: the September 2021 defence agreement between Greece and France as a case of embedded alliance formation', (2023) 32(4) *European Security*.

²⁴ Alyson J. K. Bailes, Bradley A. Thayer and Baldur Thorhallsson, 'Alliance theory and alliance 'Shelter': the complexities of small state alliance behaviour', (2016) 1(1) *Third World Thematics*.

imperatives while pursuing the quasi-alliances and, as seen below, while gradually aligning with the US strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean.

From a theoretical standpoint, this paper accepts the basic premises of neorealist/structural realist analysis but is not limited by them. The international system and the distribution of power within it remains central to how we analyse the big picture of geopolitical shifts at the international and regional level. But as we have seen, the functionality of quasi-alliances is more complex, and their motivators are more diversified compared to the traditional (neorealist) definition of alliance formation. Furthermore, it has been argued that neorealism is inadequate in explaining (small) State foreign policies as it overlooks domestic-level factors.²⁵ Specifically, it has been argued that small States' foreign policy behaviours are significantly influenced by domestic factors, especially elite ideas and identities, which shape how these States perceive and respond to external threats and opportunities.²⁶ Although many of these approaches draw on neoclassical realism (NcR) and its theoretical synthesis of system- and domestic-level variables, this paper does not adopt an NcR framework as such. Nonetheless, it does integrate different levels of analysis—the international, the regional, and the domestic—to some extent. And this includes both the RoC (as a small State) and the US (as a great power). When it comes to the domestic level, and in line with the previously articulated research methods, emphasis is given to elite ideas and perceptions as expressed in official documents or statements. Otherwise, it would be very difficult to discern (a) how quasi-alliances are presented, construed, and legitimised in the public discourse of the RoC; (b) the types and motivators of US foreign engagement in the Eastern Mediterranean (including the quasi-alliances) and the RoC more specifically; as well as (c) the relationship or disconnect between the RoC's foreign policy rhetoric, implementation, and objectives.

The Formation of Quasi-Alliances in the Eastern Mediterranean

The concept of quasi-alliances has been employed to assess and explain the geopolitical shifts that started taking place in the Eastern Mediterranean since the early 2010s, roughly the point from which our process-tracing begins. The factors driving

²⁵ Miriam Fendius Elman, 'The Foreign Policies of Small States: Challenging Neorealism in its Own Backyard', (1995) 25 *British Journal of Political Science*; Giorgi Gvalia, Bidzina Lebanidze and David S. Siroky, 'Neoclassical realism and small states: systemic constraints and domestic filters in Georgia's foreign policy', (2019) 35(1) *East European Politics*.

²⁶ Giorgi Gvalia & al., 'Thinking Outside the Bloc: Explaining the Foreign Policy of Small States', (2013) 22(1) *Security Studies*.

those shifts range from (a) the gradual deterioration of Turkey's relations with various States of the region, including Israel, Syria, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE);²⁷ (b) the breakout of the Arab uprisings in late 2010 that created a domino of regime changes and intrastate conflicts in the Middle East;²⁸ (c) the discovery of significant hydrocarbon reserves off the shores of Israel, Cyprus, and Egypt;²⁹ and (d) the emergence of the Islamic State (IS), with all the repercussions that its rise brought about.³⁰

Against this background, several common and individual interests developed among States like Cyprus, Greece, Israel, and Egypt. Beyond the individual interests of each State that primarily had to do with the unstable geopolitical environment, the common interests may be summarised under two categories—threat perceptions regarding Turkey's power projection and energy-related interests (that can also be associated with prospects for further economic development in the region).³¹ The subsequent formation of quasi-alliances was based on both security and profit-related drivers. However, Turkey can be considered as a primary factor given that, looking at things retrospectively, it would be hard to see such level of cooperation developing among these States had Turkish foreign policy not made a shift towards a more assertive and even aggressive behaviour.

The RoC played a crucial role in bringing together these States. According to Nicosia's calculations, the geopolitical 'window of opportunity' that was created because of the breakdown in Turkey's regional relations had to be capitalised on, and the RoC was well situated to play that role.³² Its relations with the Arab world had been traditionally good, while relations with Israel started to improve since the 2000s and

²⁷ Özgür Özdamar and Balkan Devlen, 'Man vs. the System: Turkish Foreign Policy After the Arab Uprisings' in berto Belloni, Vincent Della Sala and Paul Viotti (eds), *Fear and Uncertainty in Europe: The Return to Realism?*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Zenonas Tziarras, *Turkish Foreign Policy: The Lausanne Syndrome in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East* (Cham: Springer, 2022).

²⁸ Thanos Dokos, 'The Evolving Security Environment in the Eastern Mediterranean: Is NATO still a Relevant Actor?', (2012) 12(4) *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*.

²⁹ Ayla Gürel, Harry Tzimitras and Hubert Faustmann (eds), *Global Energy and the Eastern Mediterranean* (Nicosia: PRIO Cyprus Centre, 2016).

³⁰ Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (New York and London: Verso, 2014, 2015).

³¹ Tziarras, 'Israel-Cyprus-Greece...' 408-410.

³² Zenonas Tziarras, 'Cyprus's Foreign Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Trilateral Partnerships: A Neoclassical Realist Approach' in Zenonas Tziarras (ed), *The New Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral Partnerships and Regional Security*, (Re-imagining the Eastern Mediterranean Series: PCC Report, Nicosia: PRIO Cyprus Centre, 2019).

particularly after 2008. According to former Foreign Minister Marcos Kyprianou (2008–2011), this came as part of a broader opening to the Middle East.³³ It was in this context that the RoC and Israel made efforts to delimitate their exclusive economic zone (EEZ), as well as what provided the foundation for the post-2010 widening of relations in the Eastern Mediterranean.³⁴ Eventually, the bilateral EEZ agreement between the RoC and Israel was signed in 2010, a few months after the *Mavi Marmara* incident that led to the rapid deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations.³⁵ The RoC made its first natural gas discovery in 2011 (the ‘Aphrodite’ reserve in block 12) and in 2012 Benjamin Netanyahu became the first Israeli Prime Minister to visit Cyprus with energy as the main item on the agenda.³⁶ Greek-Israeli relations had already started improving since a 2009 unplanned meeting that took place in Moscow between then Greek and Israeli Prime Ministers, Andreas Papandreou and Benjamin Netanyahu, respectively.³⁷ In 2010, Papandreou made the first visit to Israel by a Greek Prime Minister in 30 years and Netanyahu followed suit a few months later becoming the first Israeli head of State to visit Greece.³⁸ It is worth noting that these visits came soon after the *Mavi Marmara* incident as well. The first trilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Ministers of Energy of Israel, the RoC, and Greece came in 2013.³⁹ Numerous trilateral meetings followed at the level of Foreign, Defence, and Energy Ministries, parliamentary committees, as well as heads

³³ This included the opening of a series of embassies in States of the Persian Gulf.

³⁴ Interview with former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marcos Kyprianou, May 2024.

³⁵ Orna Almog and Ayşegül Sever, ‘The *Mavi Marmara*: An Embattled Voyage and Its Consequences’ in Ayşegül Sever and Orna Almog (eds), *Contemporary Israeli–Turkish Relations in Comparative Perspective*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

³⁶ Herb Keinon, ‘PM arrives in Cyprus for historic visit’ *The Jerusalem Post* (16 February 2012), available at <https://www.jpost.com/diplomacy-and-politics/pm-arrives-in-cyprus-for-historic-visit> (last accessed 20 May 2024).

³⁷ Aristotle Tziampiris, *The Emergence of Israeli–Greek Cooperation* (Cham: Springer, 2015) 11.

³⁸ ‘Greek PM visits Israel for first time in decades’ *Neos Kosmos* (26 July 2010), available at <https://neoskosmos.com/en/2010/07/26/news/greece/israel-greece-three-decades/> (last accessed 20 May 2024); David Levitz, ‘Netanyahu in Greece’ *DW* (16 August 2010), available at <https://www.dw.com/en/netanyahu-visit-to-greece-signals-strategic-rapprochement/a-5915827> (last accessed 20 May 2024).

³⁹ Asher Zeiger, ‘Israel, Greece, Cyprus sign energy and water deal’ *The Times of Israel* (8 August 2013), available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-greece-cyprus-sign-energy-and-water-deal/> (last accessed 20 May 2024)

of State. The first trilateral meeting between heads of States took place in 2016.⁴⁰ As of 2024, Greece, the RoC, and Israel have completed nine such trilateral meetings.⁴¹

Similar was the trajectory of the Egypt–Cyprus–Greece partnership, which produced the first trilateral meeting at the head of State level. This emerged in the aftermath of the 2013 military coup in Egypt, which overthrew President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. The head of the coup, General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, was elected president in 2014. These developments stirred a tense feud between Turkey’s then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and El-Sisi, with the former calling the latter ‘terrorist’ and ‘tyrant’.⁴² On the one hand, Erdoğan lamented the overthrow of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood from power because they had provided a friendly and ideologically affined partner that better facilitated Ankara’s regional policy. On the other hand, Erdoğan expressed fears that Turkey could be next for ‘those who were stirring unrest’ in Egypt,⁴³ clearly pointing to Turkey’s long history with military coups and his own struggles with the military establishment in his country.⁴⁴

The RoC had already delimited its EEZ with Egypt in 2003, a deal that provided a great foundation for energy cooperation, especially after the RoC’s first natural gas discovery. Only a few months after the coup, then RoC President Nicos Anastasiades visited Cairo and signed with El-Sisi a unitisation agreement on the joint exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves.⁴⁵ The next year, the heads of the RoC, Greece, and Egypt met in Cairo for their first trilateral summit. There, then Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras stated that Greece and the RoC would act as ‘ambassadors’ for Egypt within the European Union (EU), something particularly valuable for Cairo at a time

⁴⁰ ‘Cyprus-Israel-Greece Trilateral Summit Declaration, Nicosia’ *Embassy of the Republic of Cyprus in Tel Aviv* (28 January 2016), available at http://www.mfa.gov.cy/mfa/Embassies/Embassy_TelAviv.nsf/All/9A5802D6AC5D9E69C2257F480056CC29?Opendocument (last accessed 20 May 2024)

⁴¹ ‘Joint statement of the 9th Greece, Cyprus, Israel Trilateral Summit’ *Athens-Macedonian News Agency* (4 September 2023), available at <https://www.amna.gr/en/article/757367/Joint-statement-of-the-9th-Greece--Cyprus--Israel-Trilateral-Summit> (last accessed 20 May 2024).

⁴² ‘Egypt committing state terrorism, al-Sisi and al-Assad are same: Turkish PM’ *Hürriyet Daily News* (19 August 2013), available at <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/egypt-committing-state-terrorism-al-sisi-and-al-assad-are-same-turkish-pm-52723> (last accessed 20 May 2024); ‘Erdogan slams Sisi as ‘tyrant’ over Cairo policy’ *Al Arabiya* (19 July 2014), available at <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2014/07/19/Turkey-PM-slams-Egypt-s-illegitimate-tyrant-Sisi-> (last accessed 20 May 2024).

⁴³ ‘Egypt committing state terrorism...’

⁴⁴ Soner Cagaptay, ‘Erdoğan’s Failure on the Nile’, (2019) 33 *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*.

⁴⁵ ‘Cyprus and Egypt sign deal on joint exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves’ *Cyprus Mail* (13 December 2013), available at <https://www.cyprusprofile.com/articles/cyprus-and-egypt-sign-deal-on-joint-exploitation-of-hydrocarbon-reserves> (last accessed 20 May 2024).

of domestic political and economic turbulence and the erosion of the country's international image.⁴⁶ But Samaras' statement—and the summit more broadly—also spoke to the importance that Greece and the RoC attributed to their relationship with Egypt and the opportunity to reshape the diplomatic and geopolitical landscape in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁴⁷

The Egypt–Cyprus–Greece partnership went on to develop further with multiple meetings taking place the following years and a total of nine head of State summits as of 2024. And yet, just like in the case of the Israel–Cyprus–Greece partnership, the relationship grew into a quasi-alliance at best. As Nael Shama put it, 'it fits the model of a loose, flexible entente, rather than that of a rigid alliance with airtight commitments and obligations'.⁴⁸ While the two above quasi-alliances were not the only ones formed, they were the most substantial. Greece and the RoC pursued trilateral partnerships with countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Iraq, and Armenia as well, all of which remained at a more nascent state. Overall, these meetings and diplomatic efforts, particularly as regards the two main quasi-alliances, reflected some depth of cooperation in sectors like culture, economy, trade, tourism, technology, information exchange, and security more broadly, and effectively gave rise to a broader network of relations that went beyond the trilateral mechanisms.⁴⁹ At the trilateral level, these partnerships always fell short of a more formal/institutionalised framework and a mutual defence clause, despite the good relations and various sectors of cooperation they promoted.

Nevertheless, this diplomatic activity did contribute to the shifting patterns of enmity and amity in the Eastern Mediterranean. The quasi-alliances never explicitly positioned themselves against Turkey; in fact, the joint statements often noted that the partnerships had a positive agenda and did not intend to turn against any other country. It was, however, implicit that a major factor bringing these countries

⁴⁶ 'Greece, Cyprus to represent Egypt's interests in EU' *Daily News Egypt* (8 November 2014), available at <https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2014/11/08/greece-cyprus-represent-egypts-interests-eu/> (last accessed 20 May 2024).

⁴⁷ Charalambos Tsardanidis, 'Greece's Changing Role in the Eastern Mediterranean' in Zenonas Tziarras (ed), *The New Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral Partnerships and Regional Security*, (Nicosia: PRIO Cyprus Centre, 2019) 78.

⁴⁸ Nael Shama, 'Between Alliance and Entente: The Egyptian-Greek-Cypriot Partnership' in Zenonas Tziarras (ed), *The New Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral Partnerships and Regional Security*, (Re-imagining the Eastern Mediterranean Series: PCC Report, Nicosia: PRIO Cyprus Centre, 2019) 97.

⁴⁹ Tziarras, *The Eastern Mediterranean: Between Power Struggles and Regionalist Aspirations...*

together was not merely energy or other economic benefits but also common threat perceptions vis-à-vis Turkey. Bad or troubled relations with Ankara was something that most States had in common. Thus, to the extent that Turkey's relations with these countries remained problematic, there were reasons and ample opportunity for further cooperation and 'regional integration', at least among the like-minded actors of the region. Certainly, this does not mean that the parties shared identical threat perceptions, but that the range of perceptions between them aligned to an adequate degree. For the RoC and Greece in particular, this seemed like a historic opportunity to 'punch above their weight' and deal with their long-term Turkey problem.

A 'bipolar' structure started to emerge in the Eastern Mediterranean, with said States constituting one of the two poles and Turkey the other. In fact, the networks of cooperation among the 'anti-Turkey' camp were able to expand because of Ankara's continuing confrontational foreign policy in the broader region. In May 2020, the RoC hosted the first and only five-party meeting between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the RoC, Greece, Egypt, France, and the UAE, issuing a statement that clearly 'called on Turkey to fully respect the sovereignty of all States and their sovereign rights in their maritime areas of the eastern Mediterranean'.⁵⁰ For its part, Ankara stated that the five countries were forming an 'alliance of evil'.⁵¹ At this point, it became clear that the anti-Turkey agenda was becoming more salient, though mainly on paper and in rhetoric, not least because of the growing assertiveness and militarisation of Turkish foreign policy, as seen in Ankara's military interventions in northern Syria (2016, 2018, 2019, 2020), its irregular surveys and drillings within the RoC's EEZ, and its military intervention in Libya (2019), among others.

Nicosia was eager to see this diplomatic project leading to more regional integration with the RoC at its core. In 2018, then RoC Foreign Minister Nikos Christodoulides, stated that:

Cyprus has adopted the view that hydrocarbons can become the new coal and steel, in a new regional context. A tool of cooperation and synergies that would create an economy of scale, an inviting environment for companies and investors; a tool that would meet the energy security needs of the region and that of the EU and gradually contribute to greater stability in relations among countries

⁵⁰ 'Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece and UAE condemn Turkey's actions in eastern Mediterranean' *The National* (12 May 2020), available at <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/cyprus-egypt-france-greece-and-uae-condemn-turkey-s-actions-in-eastern-mediterranean-1.1018108> (last accessed 20 May 2024).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

of the region and promote security and peace. And ultimately, why not, a catalyst for greater, more institutionalized political co-operation in the region.⁵²

It was for this reason that in 2018 the RoC Council of Ministers adopted a proposal by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs towards the establishment of a Permanent Secretariat for Trilateral Mechanisms in Nicosia.⁵³ The decision was agreed upon at the 6th Trilateral Summit between Greece, Egypt, and the RoC, and at the 5th Trilateral Summit between Israel, Greece, and the RoC.⁵⁴ The establishment of the Secretariat was acknowledged during a trilateral summit between Greece, the RoC, and Jordan in Athens.⁵⁵ However, despite the announcements and rhetoric, in practice, the institution did not attract the anticipated interest by other partner countries.⁵⁶ But beyond that, and despite efforts to staff and activate it, the Secretariat has remained idle for the most part perhaps because it was not pursued with adequate seriousness or political will, and due to lack of institutional capacity and support. This became evident in factors such as the delays to implement the decision of the Council of Ministers be-

⁵² Nikos Christodoulides, 'Remarks by H.E. Nikos Christodoulides Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cyprus' *AJC Transatlantic Institute* (17 July 2018), available at <https://transatlanticinstitute.org/videos/remarks-he-nikos-christodoulidesminister-foreign-affairs-cyprus> (last accessed 28 May 2024).

⁵³ 'Το ΥΠΕΕ για τη Γραμματεία Τριμερών Μηχανισμών Συνεργασίας και τη δημιουργία Εθνικού Συντονιστικού Μηχανισμού για Θέματα Τριμερών Συνεργασιών [MFA on the Secretariat for Trilateral Cooperation Mechanisms and the Establishment of a National Coordination Mechanism on Trilateral Partnership Matters]' *Press and Information Office* (21 November 2018), available at <https://www.pio.gov.cy/%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%BA%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%BD%CF%89%CE%B8%CE%AD%CE%BD%CF%84%CE%B1-%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B8%CF%81%CE%BF.html?id=4877#flat> (last accessed 28 May 2024).

⁵⁴ 'Κύπρος: Θεσμοθετούνται γραμματεία και συντονιστικό για τις Τριμερείς Συνεργασίες [Cyprus: Institutionalisation of Secretariat and Coordinating Centre for the Trilaterals]' *Naftemporiki* (22 November 2018), available at <https://www.naftemporiki.gr/politics/1104779/kypros-thesmothetountai-grammateia-kai-syntonistiko-gia-tis-trimereis-synergasies/> (last accessed 28 May 2024); '5th Trilateral Summit Declaration' *Israel Embassy in Greece* (14 December 2018), available at <https://embassies.gov.il/athens/NewsAndEvents/Pages/IsraelCyprusGreece5thTrilateralSummitDeclaration.aspx> (last accessed 28 May 2024).

⁵⁵ 'Joint Statement | Third Trilateral Summit Hellenic Republic – Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan- Republic of Cyprus- Athens, July 28, 2021' *Hellenic Republic – Prime Minister* (28 July 2021), available at <https://www.primeminister.gr/en/2021/07/28/27111> (last accessed 28 May 2024).

⁵⁶ Interview with former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marcos Kyprianou, May 2024. Kyprianou was an early candidate to head the Secretariat. See also, Stavros Antoniou, 'Προχωρεί η δημιουργία της Γραμματείας Τριμερών στη Λευκωσία - Με απολαβές και ωφελήματα υπουργού ο Λιλλίκας [The Establishment of the Secretariat for the Trilaterals in Nicosia Proceeds - Lillikas to receive ministerial earnings and benefits]' *Politis* (9 January 2022), available at <https://politis.com.cy/politis-news/48785/prochorei-i-dimioyrgia-tis-grammateias-trimeron-sti-lefkosia-me-apolaves-kai-ofelimata-ypoyrgoy-o-lillikas> (last accessed 28 May 2024).

tween 2018 and 2022, the difficulties in finding a building for the Secretariat, and the political saga that revolved around finding the right person to head the institution.⁵⁷

Aligned with the RoC's vision for more regional integration was also Egypt's initiative for an Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) announced in 2018. Following the decision on its establishment in 2019, its statute was signed in 2020 and came into force in 2021, rendering the EMGF an international organisation. The founding members of the EMGF were Egypt, the RoC, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. Since then, France has also become a member and three observers have been added: the US, the World Bank Group, and the EU.⁵⁸ The EMGF is based in Cairo and aims to promote cooperation 'on developing an infrastructure for gas trade within the region and with external markets'.⁵⁹ Turkey's response was to call the EMGF 'an unrealistic initiative launched by some countries with political motives, under illusions of excluding Turkey from [the] energy equation in the Eastern Mediterranean'.⁶⁰ Indeed, Turkish political, media, and academic discourse has framed the EMGF (and the related partnerships) as an anti-Turkey 'alliance', portraying Turkey as a victim.⁶¹

As demonstrated, Turkey-related drivers have been at the core of the new Eastern Mediterranean partnerships, but that was because Ankara's confrontational foreign

⁵⁷ 'Προς αναζήτηση στέγης για τη Γραμματεία Τριμερών [In search of a roof for the Secretariat of the Trilaterals]' *Phileleftheros* (1 January 2022), available at <https://www.philenews.com/eidiseis/article/574908/pros-anazitisi-stegis-gia-ti-grammatia-trimeron/> (last accessed 28 May 2024); Antoniou, 'Προχωρεί η δημιουργία της Γραμματείας Τριμερών στη Λευκωσία - Με απολαβές και ωφελήματα υπουργού ο Λιλλήκας [The Establishment of the Secretariat for the Trilaterals in Nicosia Proceeds - Lillikas to receive ministerial earnings and benefits]'; 'Γραμματεία Τριμερών με Λιλλήκα - Ίσως και Διπλωματική Ακαδημία [Secretariat of Trilaterals with Lillikas - Maybe a Diplomatic Academy as well]' *Offsite News* (21 January 2022), available at <https://www.offsite.com.cy/apopseis/paraskinio/grammateia-trimeron-me-lillika-isos-kai-diplomatiki-akadimia> (last accessed 28 May 2024).

⁵⁸ See, emgf.org.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ 'QA-3, 16 January 2020, Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hami Aksoy, in Response to a Question Regarding the Meeting to Transform the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum into an International Organization' *Republic of Turkey – Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (16 January 2020), available at https://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_-3_-dogu-akdeniz-gaz-forumu-hk-sc.en.mfa (last accessed 28 May 2024).

⁶¹ See e.g., 'Ankara slams anti-Turkey alliance meeting in Athens' *Daily Sabah* (11 February 2021), available at <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/ankara-slams-anti-turkey-alliance-meeting-in-athens> (last accessed 28 May 2024); S. Sülha Çubukçuoğlu, 'Energy Alliance in a Turbulent Region: What are Implications of the East Med Gas Forum for Turkey?', (2021) 1(1) *Turkish Journal of Policy Studies*; Pinar İpek and Tibet Gür, 'Turkey's Isolation from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum: ideological mechanisms and material interests in Energy Politics', (2021) 23(1) *Turkish Studies*.

policy gave rise to threat perceptions about Turkey's foreign policy behaviour in various States of the region. Yet, despite the RoC's (and other States') best efforts to create a counter-balancing effect against Turkey's power projection, the quasi-alliances never managed to achieve more than some soft-balancing—and ultimately an under-balancing and sub-optimal—effect.⁶² What is more, the EMGF can by no means meet the criteria of an alliance and is far from coherent in its strategic outlook. Not only because of lack of a robust legal framework, governance structures, and binding rules,⁶³ but also because the geopolitical interests and foreign policy preferences contained within it, particularly regarding Turkey, are largely heterogeneous. How could Italy's or the Palestinian Authority's interests vis-à-vis Turkey align with those of the RoC for example? The RoC does have the power to veto Turkey's accession (like any other member), but it cannot be assumed that the organisation has a coherent policy on Turkey or any other issue for that matter. Especially since the EMGF, much like the Permanent Secretariat for Trilateral Cooperation Mechanisms, has failed to generate any meaningful outcomes on energy cooperation beside serving as a political project for regional relations and even the domestic politics of participating countries.

The following section fleshes out the nexus between regional developments and the RoC's foreign policy on the one hand, and international shifts—particularly US foreign policy—on the other. Before presenting the conclusions, the paper moves on to assess the RoC's foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and identify the circumstances under which it can become more effective.

Between the Global and the Regional

Eastern Mediterranean developments during the 2010s occurred within a framework of broader shifts in the international system, namely, the real or perceived retreat of US global hegemony and the so-called 'Rise of the Rest'—particularly the middle and great powers of the East and the South. These dynamics had grown particularly salient by the end of the 2000s, after the US started bearing the cost of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2007–2008 financial crisis fallout, and its foreign policy overextension more generally in the post-Cold War era.⁶⁴ Under these circumstances

⁶² Tziarras, 'Cyprus's Foreign Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean...' 63–68.

⁶³ Arie Reich and Igor Klotsman, 'The East Mediterranean Gas Forum as a Platform for a Regional Energy Treaty', (2023) Research Paper(4538438) Bar Ilan University Faculty of Law https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4538438.

⁶⁴ Richard N. Haas, 'The Age of Nonpolarity: What will Follow US Dominance', (2008) 87(3) Foreign Affairs.

came foreign policy decisions like the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq (between 2009–2011), the US ‘pivot to Asia’, and the more reserved American involvement in the Arab uprisings that broke out in late 2010.⁶⁵ This post-hegemonic approach from Washington, which was accompanied by a significant shift of geopolitical focus, in conjunction with the ‘shift of global wealth’ from the West to the East,⁶⁶ created more space and opportunities for regional actors and middle and great powers that wanted to exploit the emerging power vacuums and have a say in the reshaping of the balances of power and the international order.⁶⁷ This was the pattern that manifested in the Eastern Mediterranean as well.

As a result, during the 21st century and especially under the presidency of Barack Obama (2009–2017), the US started adopting a different approach to grand strategy that favoured offshore balancing; a strategy based on the idea that the US ‘cannot prevent the rise of new great powers’ within and outside its influence, like Germany, China, and Russia, shifting the responsibility of regional security and power balance to other States, and reducing US involvement in managing regions such as the Middle East and Southeast Europe.⁶⁸ This can be seen in the discourse and praxis of US foreign policy, as well as in the content of official documents. For example, Table 1 demonstrates how the emphasis on ‘partners’ and ‘allies’ abroad in US official discourse grew over the first two decades of the 21st century, with the Obama administration being a distinct turning point. The 2015 NSS under Obama stated:

Abroad, we are demonstrating that while we will act unilaterally against threats to our core interests, we are stronger when we mobilize collective action. That is why we are leading international coalitions to confront the acute challenges posed by aggression, terrorism, and disease.⁶⁹

Such references are not uncommon in US NSS documents. However, similar statements in previous NSS documents during the 21st century focused on the fight against terrorism. As the 2000s came to a close and the 2010s found the US less will-

⁶⁵ Mohammed Ayoob, ‘The Arab Spring: Its Geostrategic Significance’, (2012) 19(3) Middle East Policy; Georg Löfflmann, ‘Leading from Behind – American Exceptionalism and President Obama’s Post-American Vision of Hegemony’, (2015) 20(2) Geopolitics; Janine Davidson, ‘The U.S. ‘Pivot to Asia’’, (2014) 21 American Journal of Chinese Studies.

⁶⁶ Christopher Layne, ‘It’s Real: The End of Unipolarity and the *Pax Americana*’, (2012) 56(1) International Studies Quarterly 203.

⁶⁷ Barry Buzan and George Lawson, ‘Capitalism and the Emergent World Order’, (2014) 90(1) International Affairs 74–75.

⁶⁸ Christopher Layne, ‘Offshore balancing revisited’, (2002) 25(2) Washington Quarterly 245.

⁶⁹ *National Security Strategy* (2015) i.

ing to act unilaterally, emphasis on multilateralism and collective action with regard to countering threats became more frequent, at times even as a substitute to the idea of a ‘prevailing grand strategy’ and global policing.⁷⁰ This approach was sustained in the years that followed and had a significant effect on how the US dealt with various regional contexts, including the Eastern Mediterranean.

	G. W. Bush 2002 NSS	G. W. Bush 2006 NSS	B. Obama 2010 NSS	B. Obama 2015 NSS	D. Trump 2017 NSS	J. Biden 2022 NSS
‘Partners’ & derivatives	19	48	120	79	152	167
‘Allies’ & derivatives	51	37	65	43	86	92

*Table 1: Emphasis on ‘Partners’ and ‘Allies’
in US National Security Strategy (NSS) Documents (2002–2022)*

The election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016 and the NSS that was released in 2017 became the epitome of that strategic logic through the notion of an ‘America First’ foreign policy. Namely, the prioritisation of American national interests over those of States abroad, which also entailed more isolationism and offshore balancing. The States identified as primary threats in the 2017 NSS were China, Russia, and Iran, while the terms ‘malign’ ‘influence’, ‘actors’, and ‘activities’ appear to refer particularly to Iran—seen as one of the main concerns in the Middle East—but also other threats as well. Moreover, the document pays particular attention to the regional level, articulating the US approach to different regions. The Eastern Mediterranean does not feature in the document, but under the Middle East section the document presents a broader vision for the area. It specifically notes that the US,

has the opportunity to catalyze greater economic and political cooperation that will expand prosperity for those who want to partner with us. By revitalizing partnerships with reform-minded nations and encouraging cooperation among partners in the region, the United States can promote stability and a balance of power that favors U.S. interests.⁷¹

The US perception about the Eastern Mediterranean became clearer later, when in 2019 the RoC and Greece were incorporated into a trip that then Secretary of State,

⁷⁰ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, ‘The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy’, (2016) 95(4) *Foreign Affairs* 70-71.

⁷¹ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2017) 49.

Mike Pompeo, made to the Middle East, visiting Kuwait, Israel, and Lebanon. The stated purpose of the trip was ‘to reinforce the value of our partnerships, as well as the importance of security and economic cooperation in achieving regional stability and countering the Iranian regime’s malign activities’.⁷² In the context of that trip, Pompeo participated in the 6th Trilateral Summit between Israel, the RoC, and Greece that took place in Jerusalem—a format that was called ‘3+1’. In a joint statement, the four parties affirmed ‘their shared commitment to promoting peace, stability, security, and prosperity in the Eastern Mediterranean region’, and ‘agreed to increase regional cooperation; to support energy independence and security; and to defend against external malign influences in the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader Middle East’.⁷³ Although public discourse in Greece and the RoC construed these references as pointing to Turkey, and were thus seen as cause for celebration, they were in fact completely aligned with the US NSS and the US Department of State readout about Pompeo’s visit.⁷⁴ It was thus evident that the Eastern Mediterranean, via Israel, the RoC, and Greece, had started to be seen as part of the US regional security architecture that aimed at dealing with the Iranian ‘malign influences’ and, by extension, other threats such as China and Russia.

By 2019, the RoC’s efforts to exploit the new geopolitical setting in the Eastern Mediterranean had paid off as its pro-Western foreign policy shift, coupled with growing distancing from Russia, opened new avenues for cooperation with the US. Complementing our process-tracing, Table 2 lists milestones in the US–RoC relationship based on official US government documents.⁷⁵ As seen in the NSS documents at least

⁷² ‘Secretary Pompeo’s Visit to Kuwait, Israel, and Lebanon: Reinvigorating Partnerships, Enhancing Bilateral Ties, and Countering Iran’ *US Department of State* (18 March 2019), available at <https://2017-2021.state.gov/secretary-pompeos-visit-to-kuwait-israel-and-lebanon-reinvigorating-partnerships-enhancing-bilateral-ties-and-countering-iran/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

⁷³ ‘Joint Declaration Between Cyprus, Greece, Israel, and the U.S. After the 6th Trilateral Summit’ *US Embassy & Consulate in Greece* (21 March 2019), available at <https://gr.usembassy.gov/joint-declaration-between-cyprus-greece-israel-and-the-u-s-after-the-6th-trilateral-summit/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

⁷⁴ The readout’s emphases were clear: Lebanon and derivatives are mentioned 21 times; Israel and derivatives 11 times; Kuwait and derivatives 10 times; Greece twice; and Cyprus twice. See, ‘Secretary Pompeo’s Visit to Kuwait, Israel, and Lebanon: Reinvigorating Partnerships, Enhancing Bilateral Ties, and Countering Iran’

⁷⁵ ‘U.S. Security Cooperation with the Republic of Cyprus’ *US Department of State* (24 May 2021), available at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-republic-of-cyprus/> (last accessed 3 June 2024); ‘Joint Statement by the United States of America and the Republic of Cyprus on the Signing of a Defense Cooperation Roadmap for 2024-2029’ *US Department of Defense* (10 September 2024), available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3900834/joint-statement-by-the-united->

since 2015, the US has been particularly concerned about the projection of Russian power in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean, with Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, and Libya considered as hotspots. The RoC was also seen as a largely pro-Russian country and that hindered deeper cooperation with the US in the past. However, things gradually changed after 2013. The bail-in that the Cypriot economy had to suffer because of the financial crisis significantly affected Russian capital and investments in Cyprus in the medium term.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Turkey's pro-Russian turn particularly after 2015 and the frequent tensions between Ankara and Washington contributed to Nicosia's decision-making towards a pro-Western shift.⁷⁷ These trends were further solidified after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Western sanctions imposed on the former and with which the RoC complied.⁷⁸ Notably, in 2022, the US Department of State acknowledged the RoC's cooperation 'in efforts to implement reforms on anti-money laundering regulations and financial regulatory oversight', and the necessary steps that it made 'to deny Russian military vessels access to ports for refueling and servicing'.⁷⁹ On this basis, the US government decided to lift the arms embargo from the RoC for the fiscal year 2023 with an annual review clause.

states-of-america-and-the-republic-of-cyprus-on-t/ (last accessed 3 November 2024); 'Joint Statement on the First Strategic Dialogue Between the Republic of Cyprus and the United States of America' *US Department of State* (23 October 2024), available at <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-first-strategic-dialogue-between-the-republic-of-cyprus-and-the-united-states-of-america/> (last accessed 3 November 2024); 'Readout of President Joe Biden's Meeting with President Nikos Christodoulides of the Republic of Cyprus' *The White House* (30 October 2024), available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/10/30/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-meeting-with-president-nikos-christodoulides-of-the-republic-of-cyprus/> (last accessed 3 November 2024); 'Lifting of Defense Trade Restrictions on the Republic of Cyprus for Fiscal Year 2023' *US Department of State* (16 September 2022), available at <https://www.state.gov/lifting-of-defense-trade-restrictions-on-the-republic-of-cyprus-for-fiscal-year-2023/> (last accessed 3 June 2024); Giannis Ioannou, 'Τα βήματα για ενίσχυση των αμυντικών σχέσεων Λευκωσίας-Ουάσιγκτον [The steps for strengthening Nicosia-Washington defense relations]' *Kathimerini Kyprou* (12 December 2024), available at <https://www.kathimerini.com.cy/gr/politiki/ta-bimata-gia-enisxysi-ton-amyntikwn-sxeseon-leykosias-oyasigkton> (last accessed 15 December 2024).

⁷⁶ Elena B. Zavyalova & al., 'Trends and Issues in Economic Relations of Cyprus and Russia', (2020) 31(3) *Cyprus Review*.

⁷⁷ Alexandros Zachariades, 'The Republic of Cyprus and the US: A Revamped Relationship with Key Limitations' in Zenonas Tziarras (ed), *The Foreign Policy of the Republic of Cyprus: Local, Regional and International Dimensions*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) 111.

⁷⁸ Helena Smith, 'Our credibility must be safeguarded': Cyprus in turmoil after Russia sanctions' *The Guardian* (22 April 2023), available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/22/cyprus-russia-sanctions-us-uk> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

⁷⁹ 'Lifting of Defense Trade Restrictions....'.

Year	Event
2018	Signature of Statement of Intent on bilateral security cooperation
2019	The Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act (2019) signed into law
2019	Accreditation of the RoC's first Defence Attaché at its embassy in Washington
2020	Decision on RoC participation in the US International Military Education Training Program (IMET)
2020	Temporary waiver on International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) restrictions to allow for the direct commercial sale of non-lethal defence articles and services to and from the RoC
2022	Inauguration of the \$5-million Cyprus Centre for Land, Open-sea, and Port Security (CYCLOPS) regional training centre focused on border security and preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction
2022	Full lifting of arms embargo Approval of exports, re-exports, and transfer of defence articles to the RoC for 2023
2024	Defence Cooperation Framework Agreement
2024	First Strategic Dialogue Meeting
2024	Meeting of American President Joe Biden with RoC President Nikos Christodoulides in Washington, DC
2024	New amendment to the US Defense Budget Bill (NDAA) for the first time includes the RoC in the list of countries eligible to participate in US military training programmes for Eastern Europe.

Table 2: Milestones in US–RoC Relations

The RoC hoped that, much like with the relations that developed in the Eastern Mediterranean after 2010, it would be able to exploit the growing rift between Turkey and the US. After all, this was an approach that Greece had adopted as well, dramatically enhancing its security cooperation with the US, often to the dismay of Ankara.⁸⁰ Washington did not only welcome the RoC's shift but also encouraged and rewarded it along the way with the enhancement of relations on multiple levels. It was in this context that the American government under Trump promoted the Eastern Mediter-

⁸⁰ Zenonas Tziarras, 'The Stakes for Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean' in Valeria Talbot (ed), *The Scramble for the Eastern Mediterranean*, (Milan: ISPI, 2021) 34-36; 'Turkey's Erdogan says Greek PM Mitsotakis 'no longer exists' for him' *Reuters* (23 May 2022), available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkeys-erdogan-says-greek-pm-mitsotakis-no-longer-exists-him-2022-05-23/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

anean Security and Energy Partnership of 2019 that specifically identifies Greece, the RoC, and Israel as important partners in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, reiterating the joint statement of the 2019 3+1 summit in Jerusalem on regional ‘malign influences’ and particularly Russia. The Act also points to Turkey’s controversial decision to purchase the S-400 antiballistic system from Russia and implicitly presents the deepening of US–Israel–RoC–Greece relations as an outcome of Turkish foreign policy behaviour.⁸¹ Although Washington’s frustration with Turkey has been evident in recent years, this should not be seen as proof of its desire to marginalise Turkey, but rather as a way of applying pressure on Ankara to the end of re-engaging it, all the while establishing strategic alternatives and offshore balancing networks in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸²

It is worth noting that the 2022 NSS issued by the Joe Biden administration presents a vision for the broader Middle East similar to that of the NSS issued under Trump. The Eastern Mediterranean Act of 2019 is not mentioned in the NSS, but under the Middle East section it notes: ‘We will seek to extend and deepen Israel’s growing ties to its neighbours and other Arab States, including through the Abraham Accords, while maintaining our ironclad commitment to its security’.⁸³ The Abraham Accords were promoted by the Trump administration. Signed in September 2020, the project represented a significant milestone in Middle Eastern diplomacy, marking the normalisation of relations between Israel and the UAE and between Israel and Bahrain, later including Sudan and Morocco.⁸⁴ Evidently, the Biden administration saw its Middle East policy as a continuation of the established approach of offshore balancing, encompassing the networks of cooperation that developed in the Eastern Mediterranean as well. And indeed, in line with the 2022 NSS, the Biden administration sought to expand neighbouring ties in the area, brokering a ‘historic’ deal in 2022 between Israel and Lebanon that delimited their EEZ maritime boundary.⁸⁵ In

⁸¹ See, *Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019* (2019) <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th>.

⁸² Discussion with high-level American diplomat, May 2024. See also, Ryan Gingeras, ‘An Honest Broker No Longer: The United States between Turkey and Greece’ *War on the Rocks* (3 January 2023), available at <https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/an-honest-broker-no-longer-the-united-states-between-turkey-and-greece/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

⁸³ *National Security Strategy* (2022) 42.

⁸⁴ ‘The Abraham Accords’ *US Department of State* (2020), available at <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

⁸⁵ Maya Gebeyly and Maayan Lubell, ‘Israel, Lebanon finalise maritime demarcation deal without mutual recognition’ *Reuters* (27 October 2022), available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/>

the same vein, the 2022 NSS reference to the EMFG as one of the ‘partners and allies’ with whom the US will work ‘to ensure energy security and affordability’, was the first mention to an Eastern Mediterranean project in a US NSS and another indication of the linkages that Washington saw between the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean with regard to its security architecture for the broader region.⁸⁶

As such, although quasi-alliances in the Eastern Mediterranean cannot be considered a US initiative but rather a project conceived by Nicosia,⁸⁷ they were later integrated into the US policy for the region, facilitated by deteriorating relations with Turkey and the pro-Western shift of the RoC. From the mid-2010s onwards, Washington prompted the RoC to expand the trilateral partnership mechanisms and Nicosia was happy to oblige, thinking that the closer relationship with the US would prove valuable in its own efforts to deal with the Turkish threat and find a settlement to the Cyprus conflict.⁸⁸ But the question remains: How efficient and sustainable was the RoC’s policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, as manifested through the trilateral partnership mechanisms and multilateral networks of cooperation?

Assessing the RoC’s Foreign Policy

Two things can be noted regarding the RoC’s foreign policy: First, starting in the early 2010s, it was favoured by a permissive strategic environment, namely, regional, and international developments that created opportunities. And second, the RoC managed to exploit those opportunities at least to a certain extent, shift its international orientation towards the West, and emerge as an important actor in the Eastern Mediterranean with a geopolitical weight disproportionate to its size. To what extent, however, has the RoC managed to serve its three main and traditional foreign policy objectives, which are to (a) deal with the Turkish threat; (b) work towards the resolution of the Cyprus problem; and (c) promote regional integration?⁸⁹

lebanon-israel-set-approve-maritime-border-deal-2022-10-27/ (last accessed 3 June 2024).

⁸⁶ *National Security Strategy* (2022) 28.

⁸⁷ Interview with former RoC Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marcos Kyprianou, May 2024. See also, ‘Υπάρχει ενδιαφέρον για διεύρυνση τριμερών συνεργασιών, λέει ο ΓΓ της Μόνιμης Γραμματείας [There’s interest in expanding the trilaterals, says SG of Permanent Secretariat]’ *Cyprus Times* (27 May 2022), available at <https://cyprustimes.com/politiki/yparchei-endiaferon-gia-dievrynsi-trimeron-synergasion-leei-o-ng-tis-monimis-grammateias-video/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

⁸⁸ Interview with high-level RoC technocrat, March 2024.

⁸⁹ ‘Foreign Policy - Themes’ *Republic of Cyprus - Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (2024), available at <https://mfa.gov.cy/themes/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

Precisely because the trilateral and multilateral schemes of cooperation remained rather weak and informal, they have also proved fragile. On the one hand, the very nature of the quasi-alliances limits the level and kinds of commitment that participating States have to each other. On the other hand, institutionalisation efforts such as the Permanent Secretariat of Trilateral Mechanisms and the EMGF remain idle and, in the case of the latter, with a very niche focus and virtually no results.⁹⁰ These weaknesses made the newly emergent Eastern Mediterranean security architecture more susceptible to exogenous, systemic pressures. More specifically, the same variable that facilitated the change at the regional level, namely, the shift in Turkish foreign policy, was the one that gradually brought the sustainability of the new Eastern Mediterranean partnerships into question.

Particularly since 2020, and at the prospect of a new administration in the US, Ankara embarked on an effort to normalise its relations with various countries of the region and beyond. Unsurprisingly, these included countries that have participated in the ‘anti-Turkey’ bloc that emerged in the Eastern Mediterranean and spilled over into other areas. Since then, Turkey normalised its relations with Saudi Arabia, Greece, the UAE, Armenia, France, Egypt, and Israel (albeit the latter effort was short-lived due to the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023). This created a level of excitement in the West, that Turkey was finally abandoning its confrontational foreign policy for a more sensible approach. The hopes culminated in 2023 when Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was re-elected and made significant changes in his cabinet, signalling a more pragmatic financial and foreign policy.⁹¹ Soon after, the Turkish government seemed to live up to Western expectations when it finally ratified Sweden’s accession to NATO in exchange for the endorsement of a sale of F-16 fighter jets by the US Congress.⁹²

These developments did not nullify the relationships developed in the Eastern Mediterranean, nor did they halt cooperation; and they probably will not do so in the future. However, they subvert the vision that the RoC had for the region and raise obstacles to the further integration of those relations. Indeed, one of the driv-

⁹⁰ Interview with high-level RoC technocrat; Interview with high-level Jordanian technocrat, May 2024.

⁹¹ Asli Aydintasbas and Jeremy Shapiro, ‘Erdoğan’s Post-Western Turkey’ *Foreign Affairs* (11 August 2023), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/turkey/recep-erdogan-post-western-turkey> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

⁹² Jonathan Spicer, ‘US envoy sees rapid F-16s sale to Turkey after Sweden NATO bid sign-off’ *Reuters* (25 January 2024), available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-envoy-sees-rapid-f-16s-sale-turkey-after-sweden-nato-bid-sign-off-2024-01-25/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

ers behind Turkey's efforts to normalise its relations with the region was the deconstruction of what it perceived as an anti-Turkey security architecture.⁹³ The RoC saw the dynamics of cooperation and regionalism through a security lens, investing in the prospect that further regional integration could have a balancing effect vis-à-vis Turkey.⁹⁴ But, as already seen, this objective has not yet been—and is now less likely to be—achieved. Moreover, Turkey's 'return' to the Eastern Mediterranean, even if it remains troubled, could open further avenues for energy cooperation with States of the region, particularly Egypt and Israel, thus hindering other prospective projects that involve Cyprus and Greece.⁹⁵

Not only were the RoC's efforts not effective in that respect, but it also has been argued that the exaggerated expectations projected by Nicosia regarding the trilateral partnerships and other developments in the Eastern Mediterranean have at times accomplished the opposite results. Discourse and content analysis illuminate these exaggerations and emphases in the rhetoric of key RoC politicians, especially when contextualised within the geopolitical processes in the Eastern Mediterranean. For example, in 2017, then President Nicos Anastasiades stated that the presence of the American oil company ExxonMobil in the Cypriot EEZ constituted a 'protection shield'.⁹⁶ He reiterated the same sentiments in the 2017 political programme for his re-election to the presidency, misleadingly framing the trilateral partnerships as 'alliances':

On our own – Cypriot – initiative we have formed together with Greece as well, Trilateral Partnerships with Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. These

⁹³ Tziarras, 'International Competition and Cooperation...'

⁹⁴ See also, DISY's view on the value of trilateral partnerships. DISY (Democratic Rally) is the party that was in power from 2013 until 2023. Nikos Christodoulides, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and government spokesperson, who was elected president in 2023 was part of that government and member of DISY. 'Ανακοίνωση Δημοκρατικού Συναγερμού για τριμερή Κύπρου, Ελλάδας, Ισραήλ [Announcement of Democratic Rally about the Cyprus, Greece, Israel Trilateral]' *DISY* (4 September 2023), available at <https://disy.org.cy/announcements/%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%BA%CE%BF%CE%AF%CE%BD%CF%89%CF%83%CE%B7-%CE%B4%CE%B7%CE%BC%CE%BF%CE%BA%CF%81%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%BF%CF%8D-%CF%83%CF%85%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%B3%CE%B5%CF%81%CE%B-C%CE%BF%CF%8D-918/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

⁹⁵ Francesco Siccardi, *Understanding the Energy Drivers of Turkey's Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC and Brussels: Carnegie Europe, 2024) 13-23.

⁹⁶ 'ΠτΔ: Ασπίδα προστασίας της ΚΔ η ExxonMobil στην ΑΟΖ μας [President: ExxonMobil in our EEZ is a Protection Shield for the RoC]' *RIK News* (8 March 2017), available at <https://news.rik.cy/article/2017/3/8/ptd-aspida-prostasias-tes-kd-e-exxonmobil-sten-aoz-mas-1603085/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

are alliances that are already on a dynamic track towards materializing certain projects and actions [...] Our aim is to bring all of our alliances into a regional informal forum, soon to be transformed into an important security and cooperation leverage for the whole region [...] We managed all of the threats and attempts to destabilize and prevent our drilling initiatives with decisiveness and – most importantly – safety, thus shielding Cyprus and our energy prospects.⁹⁷

This was not a unique reference in the programme as the word was used a total of nine times, always in relation to the RoC's national security and defence and its relations with other countries or the involvement of international oil companies in the republic's energy activities. From the excerpt above, it is moreover evident that these 'alliances' are portrayed as effective in countering threats and shielding the RoC. In 2020, then Foreign Minister Nicos Christodoulides reiterated this idea, stating that the trilateral partnerships have 'politically and legally shielded' the RoC's EEZ. He was criticised about his statements from opposition party AKEL and part of the press.⁹⁸ As a presidential candidate in 2022, Christodoulides argued that the RoC's EEZ delimitations 'produce security, stability and prosperity, and contribute to the promotion and prevalence of peace wherever it is absent'.⁹⁹

These were clear exaggerations because of the misleading usage of concepts like 'alliance', 'shielding', and 'protection', but mostly because they stood in stark contrast with reality. Not only was Turkey not deterred but it also proceeded to impose a naval blockade on a ENI drillship that was on its way to drill within the RoC's EEZ in 2018 and conducted a series of illegal surveys and drillings within the Turkey-occupied continental shelf as well as the delimited EEZ of the RoC.¹⁰⁰ Thus, it became clear

⁹⁷ Nicos Anastasiades, 'Το Όραμα, το Σχέδιο και το Έργο του Νίκου Αναστασιάδη: Η Κύπρος της νέας Εποχής [The Vision, Plan and Work of Nicos Anastasiades: The Cyprus of the New Era]' *Dialogos* (2017), 71, available at <https://dialogos.com.cy/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/stathera-bimata-mprosta.pdf> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

⁹⁸ 'Αντιπαράθεση ΑΚΕΛ – Χριστοδουλίδη για θωράκιση ΑΟΖ [AKEL-Christodoulides Confrontation about the shielding of EEZ]' *Phileleftheros* (22 January 2020), available at <https://www.philenews.com/eidiseis/article/897297/antiparathesi-akel-christodoulidi-gia-thorakisi-aoz/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

⁹⁹ 'Χριστοδουλιδης: Ασφάλεια λόγω οριοθετήσεων ΑΟΖ και υφαλοκρηπίδας [Christodoulides: Security because of EEZ and continental shelf delimitations]' *Offsite News* (5 November 2022), available at <https://www.offsite.com.cy/eidiseis/politiki/hristodoylidis-asfaleia-logo-oriothetiseon-aoz-kai-yfalokripidas> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

¹⁰⁰ 'Turkey's illegal drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean: EU puts two persons on sanctions list' *Council of the EU* (27 February 2020), available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/02/27/turkey-s-illegal-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-eu-puts-two-persons-on-sanctions-list/> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

that the government's rhetoric was not presenting an accurate picture, but was rather used for populist purposes and potentially gathering more international support. It has also been argued that pompous rhetoric about the prospect of energy cooperation and regional integration might have accelerated Turkey's coercive response and its own effort to present itself as a victim excluded from the regional (energy) security architecture.¹⁰¹ This was certainly how Turkish officials tried to frame Ankara's coercive actions in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁰² Former RoC Foreign Minister Erato Kozakou-Markoulli (2007–2008, 2011–2013) argued in an interview that the RoC (under Anastasiades) overestimated its ability to deter Turkey and was not well prepared for its actions in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁰³ As such, although the RoC's initiatives in the Eastern Mediterranean were in themselves positive, they arguably ended up leaving the RoC more exposed to than shielded from Turkish aggression. What is more, they have failed to render the quasi-alliances more institutionalised and formal, or to further integrate regional cooperation.

When it comes to the RoC's objective of finding a viable solution to the Cyprus conflict, the foreign policy implemented since the 2010s has not had any substantial results. Though the settlement of the conflict does not depend on the RoC, given that there are other parties involved and particularly Turkey as the occupying force, the 2010s presented a disconnect between foreign policy and domestic efforts at a peace process. Ideally, foreign policy should complement the peace process, and yet a popular opinion among Anastasiades' critics, at the level of public intellectuals, the press, and opposition parties, was that while the government inflated the country's international position and foreign policy achievements, it simultaneously downplayed the consequences of the protracted stalemate in peace talks that occurred after the collapse of the 2017 Crans Montana Conference on Cyprus.¹⁰⁴ The idea was that the RoC

¹⁰¹ Interview with high-level RoC technocrat, March 2024. For this kind of criticism in the press see also e.g., Makarios Drousiotis, 'Τι εξωτερική πολιτική ασκεί ο Χριστοδουλίδης [What kind of Foreign Policy does Christodoulides exercise?]' *makarioseu* (17 May 2020), available at <http://www.makarios.eu/cgibin/hweb?-A=6764&-V=articles> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

¹⁰² See e.g., Barçın Yinanç, 'Blue Homeland 'shows Turkey has become a maritime power'' *Hürriyet Daily News* (4 March 2019), available at <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/blue-homeland-shows-turkey-has-become-a-maritime-power-141624> (last accessed 3 June 2024).

¹⁰³ Apostolos Tomaras, 'Δεν Πείσαμε την Ευρώπη για την Τουρκία [We did not convince Europe about Turkey]' *Kathimerini Kyprou* (13 October) 9.

¹⁰⁴ See, 'Ύπν και μανία με τους επικριτές του για το Κυπριακό ο Νίκος Αναστασιάδης [Anastasiades is furious with his critics about the Cyprus problem]' *Reporter* (27 November 2018), available at <https://reporter.com.cy/article/2018/11/27/219422/pur-kai-mania-me-tous-epikrites-tou-gia-to-kypriako-o-nikos-anastasiades/> (last accessed 4 June 2024); Kyriakos Pieridis, 'Τι θα κάνει με το Κυπριακό ο νέος

government saw the new partnerships and regional initiatives as power multipliers that would improve its leverage over Turkey and thus focused its energy on them at the expense of a more committed effort at peace. To reduce the negative outcome of Crans Montana to this interpretation would be misleading.¹⁰⁵ It is, however, hard to escape the fact that although RoC foreign policy has broken some new ground with respect to its Eastern Mediterranean openings and relations with the US, it has not delivered any substantial results vis-à-vis its main strategic objectives.

Certainly, one must recognise that a small State like the RoC is more vulnerable to systemic constraints than greater powers. Yet one should also admit that the RoC has not done enough to mitigate its vulnerability and shield itself from the unpredictability of geopolitical shifts. As argued elsewhere, the RoC lacks clear strategic direction, which could come in the form of an NSS document, while it also lacks or has underdeveloped institutional capacity.¹⁰⁶ The simplest and perhaps most important example in this respect is the fact that the RoC's Foreign Ministry is dramatically understaffed and underfunded. Its funding amounted to only one percent of the national budget for 2024, while several of its diplomatic missions abroad are staffed by a single diplomat.¹⁰⁷ It is therefore practically impossible for the RoC to actually 'punch above its weight' under these circumstances, when the most fundamental capacities and means are not in place; it is at least overly ambitious to be a proactive and key player

Κύπριος πρόεδρος; [What will the new president do with the Cyprus problem?]' *efsyn* (23 October 2022), available at https://www.efsyn.gr/stiles/apopseis/364143_ti-tha-kanei-me-kypriako-o-neos-kyprios-proedros (last accessed 3 June 2024).

¹⁰⁵ For an extensive analysis on the Crans Montana talks and the factors that shaped the Greek-Cypriot approach see, Zenonas Tziarras, 'Οι συνομιλίες στο Κραν Μοντανά και η Ελληνοκυπριακή προσέγγιση [The Crans Montana Talks and the Greek-Cypriot Approach]' in Kostas Ifantis and Nikos Chatziioakeim (eds), *Το Κυπριακό στον 21ο Αιώνα: Διπλωματία, Ασφάλεια, Ενέργεια [The Cyprus Problem in the 21st Century: Diplomacy, Security, Energy]*, (Athens: I. Sideri, 2024).

¹⁰⁶ For extensive discussion on these issues see, Constantinos Adamides, 'The Challenges of Formulating National Security Strategies (NSS) in the Presence of Overarching Existential Threats', (2019) 30(1) *Cyprus Review*; Ioannis-Sotirios Ioannou, 'Assessing Maturity in the RoC's Eastern Mediterranean Foreign Policy' in Zenonas Tziarras (ed), *The Foreign Policy of the Republic of Cyprus: Local, Regional and International Dimensions*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Zenonas Tziarras, 'Foreign Policy Maturity and Grand Strategy: The Way Forward for the Republic of Cyprus' in Zenonas Tziarras (ed), *The Foreign Policy of the Republic of Cyprus: Local, Regional and International Dimensions*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

¹⁰⁷ Andreas Pimbishis, 'Έξωτερική πολιτική με ψίχουλα από τον προϋπολογισμό [Foreign policy with crumbs from the budget]' *Phileleftheros* (26 November 2023), available at <https://www.philenews.com/politiki/article/1411324/exoteriki-politiki-me-psichoula-apo-ton-proipologismo/> (last accessed 4 June 2024).

in the Eastern Mediterranean if such a key institution as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is overstretched and overwhelmed merely by the everyday workload. Similarly, the RoC National Security Council (NSC), announced in May 2023, has not yet functioned properly. It has neither produced—nor started to produce—an NSS nor undertaken a planning role, as its mandate dictates.¹⁰⁸ It has thus far functioned primarily as an ad hoc consulting body for the management of crises, such as the massive influx of refugees in Cyprus or Iran’s missile strike on Israel.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Against this backdrop, Nicosia needs to take its foreign policy-making and implementation more seriously. Although the progress made during the 2010s should not be dismissed, it should at the same time be acknowledged that much of the RoC’s foreign policy accomplishments can be attributed to developments at the international and regional levels that created new opportunities. Bilateral and multilateral relations, including quasi-alliances, were able to form within this framework creating unforeseen geopolitical dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean, including unforeseen foreign policy activism by the RoC. However, revisiting the trilateral partnerships after a testing period of almost a decade has demonstrated that ‘quasi-alliance’ was and remains an accurate description of these relationships. This is evidenced by two facts: (a) they never transitioned into traditional alliances, and (b) they were loose or informal enough so as not to prevent foreign policy reconfigurations by participating States, specifically in relation to Turkey.

The war in Gaza that broke out in October 2023 has put a halt to Turkey’s efforts to ‘deconstruct’ the Eastern Mediterranean security architecture—it has instead ushered Turkey and Israel into a new cycle of crisis and hostile interactions that have

¹⁰⁸ Costas Venizelos, “Έτσι θα λειτουργεί το ΣΕΑ - Αποκαλύπτουμε έγγραφο [This is how the NSC will function - We reveal document]” *Phileleftheros* (10 April 2023), available at <https://www.philenews.com/eidiseis/article/1301724/etsi-tha-litourgi-to-sea-apokaliptoume-engrafo/> (last accessed 4 June 2024).

¹⁰⁹ ‘Συνεδριάζει εκτάκτως το Συμβούλιο Εθνικής Ασφάλειας για το Μεταναστευτικό [Urgent Meeting of the National Security Council on the Migration Issue]’ *Offsite News* (1 April 2024), available at <https://www.offsite.com.cy/eidiseis/astynomika/synedriazei-ektaktos-symboylio-ethnikis-asfaleias-gia-metanasteytiko> (last accessed 4 June 2024); ‘Συνεδριάζει εκτάκτως το Συμβούλιο Εθνικής Ασφαλείας [Urgent Meeting of the National Security Council]’ *Reporter* (13 April 2024), available at <https://reporter.com.cy/article/2024/4/13/769508/sunedriazei-ektaktos-to-sumboulio-ethnikes-asphaleias/> (last accessed 4 June 2024).

broken down their diplomatic and trade relations.¹¹⁰ Without a doubt, the Gaza war has caused structural changes to the geopolitical setting of the Middle East, threatening the US-inspired regional order that came about especially after the Abraham Accords and increasing the risk of an all-out regional war. Things may well change again. But as long as the war persists, the improvement of Turkish-Israeli relations remains highly unlikely and the likelihood of further deterioration in Israel's relations with the Arab world increases. This dynamic was further complicated by the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, when Hayat Tahrir al-Sham marched to Damascus late in 2024, and the opening of a new cycle of regional crisis and instability.

These circumstances present the RoC with a difficult geopolitical environment, but they also provide it with some time and opportunities. Amid the chaos, the RoC stands as a stable EU Member State and a reliable partner for regional and international actors alike. Its positive relations with the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, as well as its EU membership, could provide a foundation for dialogue, peace talks, know-how, and post-conflict reconstruction. The vision of regional cooperation does not have to be abandoned, nor given up to the forces of conflict and deconstruction. It should perhaps be reconsidered and reframed to adapt to the new realities. However, this requires that the RoC takes itself, its role, and the region more seriously by investing in its own means and capabilities, as well as labouring towards a coherent and institutionalised geopolitical vision and foreign policy strategy. Time and circumstances may not always be 'gracious' to the RoC, and when bad turns to worse it should be able to lean on well-thought contingency plans, tested relationships, and its own national capacities.

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¹¹⁰ Gallia Lindenstrauss and Rémi Daniel, 'Turkish-Israeli Relations at a Dangerous Turning Point' *ISNSS Insight 1853* (19 May 2023), available at <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/turkey-israel-low/> (last accessed 4 June 2024).

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