

# **The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition: Multipolarity, Politics and Power**

**SPYRIDON N. LITSAS AND ARISTOTLE TZIAMPIRIS (EDITORS)**

**Ashgate (Surrey and Burlington, VT), 259 pp.  
ISBN: 978-1-4724-4039**

*The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition: Multipolarity, Politics and Power* is a very timely and insightful book that looks at the changing geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean while maintaining a global perspective, which is perhaps the most appropriate way of examining a geopolitical region or sub-system, especially at this point in time. According to the editors, Spyridon N. Litsas and Aristotle Tziampiris, the purpose of the book is to contribute to the understanding of the Eastern Mediterranean, given its increased importance, as well as to provide a picture of the effects of Multipolarity (consequences, challenges, perils and opportunities) on this regional level. Lastly, it aspires to become part of the larger debate about 'the potential ramifications and sustainability of a multipolar era in the Eastern Mediterranean' (p. xviii).

The volume comprises 16 chapters from authors coming from Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Israel, Iran, and beyond. There is thus a good balance of perspectives that enriches the book's content, serves its research aims and adds to its credibility and academic integrity. Rightly, the chapters deal with all major geopolitical issues of the Eastern Mediterranean and touch upon every country of this geographical area, at least briefly. And yet the scope of the book is broad enough to encompass matters that are of interest for the study of the Middle East as well, such as the roles of Iran and Jordan, as well as the Arab uprisings and their repercussions. In addition, just like any scholarly work on international politics that wants to be taken seriously, the book pays adequate attention to the role of great powers, such as the United States, Russia and China, and their interests in the region.

After the editors' forward, the book starts with an excellent and rather theoretical chapter by Litsas. One could say that this chapter outlines the logic of the book and sets the foundations for what follows; and that is why it is worth some special mention. Litsas starts with the discussion of some of the most fundamental concepts in International Relations, such as Peace, War and Justice, and then moves on to what he believes 'may constrain chaos to the minimum for certain periods of time' (p. 8) despite the dim chances of Peace prevailing over War: the stability of the international system.

Through an analysis of different kinds of systemic polarity (unipolarity, bipolarity) he argues that a multipolar international system, like the one currently emerging, is less prone to total wars but ‘has the capacity to profoundly destabilize regions with a clear tendency to political turmoil’ such as the Eastern Mediterranean (p. 15). Therefore, Litsas urges the ‘passengers of the region’ to ‘mind the multipolar gap’ (p. 15).

In a similar vein the second and rather short chapter by Panayiotis Ifestos examines the transition from bipolarity to multipolarity, lays out the features of today’s multipolarity, not least in comparison to the 19<sup>th</sup> century one, and looks at the structural and strategic effects on the Eastern Mediterranean. In chapter three, Pavel Shlykov gives an excellent account of Russia’s foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean since 1991, particularly looking at the energy and military sectors as well as Russia’s bilateral relations with Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Israel and Greece. Shlykov highlights the foreign policy priorities and the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean for Russia. According to its title, chapter four, by Akis Kalaitzidis, examines the US foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Although the chapter provides a good picture of the current state of US foreign policy, it lacks adequate focus on the Eastern Mediterranean and misses the opportunity to conceptualize the importance of this region for US foreign policy. In the following chapter (five) Christina Lin provides perhaps the only comprehensive account to date on China’s foreign policy in the Levant and the Eastern Mediterranean, a reason why the text is heavily based on primary sources (i.e. media reports). The chapter looks at the rise of China (and its interests) in a region where Western influence has traditionally been far stronger, by focusing on competing energy, economic and maritime interests. Lastly, Lin suggests different avenues through which ‘regional stakeholders such as, US, EU, and NATO’ can ‘constructively leverage China’s posture to play a bigger role in the region’ (p. 71-72).

Chapter six, by Nikolaos Zahariades, takes another look at US foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, specifically under the Obama Administration. Zahariades makes the case that American foreign policy is primarily driven by domestic politics and, against this background, reviews developments and dynamics in the US and how these affect American external action with emphasis on the post-‘Arab Spring’ Eastern Mediterranean. Chapter seven is an interesting study on the foreign policy of Cyprus – one of the very few that do not revolve around the Cyprus problem – by Ilias I. Kouskouvelis. Kouskouvelis pays particular attention to the role of ‘smart’ leadership to demonstrate how it can make a difference in a small state’s international outlook. Raymond Hinnebusch’s chapter (eight) gives interesting insight on the Middle East side of things, from the Persian Gulf to Egypt and Turkey, explaining how ‘inherited structure – the “deep state,” historic identity cleavages, regional power balances, and enduring dependencies on the global “core”’ (p. 119) – prevailed over agency thus hindering the democratic development of the Arab uprisings and the transformation

of regional politics. Chapter nine, by Ilter Turan, makes a good job presenting the sources and drivers of the foreign policy of Turkey – one of the most important actors in the region – especially after the Cold War and under the AKP government. It also tracks well the different changes Turkish foreign policy has gone through since the mid-2000s and particularly after 2011. However, Turkey's recent 'consistent change in orientation' (p. 142) may have been overstated given that AKP's Turkey has thus far mostly adjusted its tactics and foreign policy tools rather than change strategic orientation, which nonetheless may well happen in the future.

In chapter ten Stacey Gutkowski adopts a more critical approach to security and the study of the region, looking at vernacular or human (in)security after the 'Arab Spring' specifically in Egypt and Jordan, a case of 'liminal security assemblage' and 'moderate security assemblage' respectively. Unlike traditional International Relations approaches, Gutkowski provides an interesting analysis of 'structures of feeling' at the individual and popular levels and their interaction with security and stability at the national and regional levels. The following chapter (eleven) by Aslı Tunç scrutinizes relationship between the Millennial Generation (or Generation Y), social media and political participation in Turkey before and during the Gezi Park protests of 2013. As Tunç concludes, based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research, 'contrary to the widespread belief, young people in Turkey were not apolitical, or apathetic, but rather cynical' (p. 174). Another critical approach comes from Constantinos Adamides and Odysseas Christou in chapter twelve, where the authors look at the role of Cyprus and energy securitization in the Eastern Mediterranean (particularly Cyprus, Turkey and Israel) through the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). Importantly, the authors point to certain weaknesses of RSCT and the potential for the emergence of new RSCs within the theory.

Chapter thirteen by Amikam Nachmani examines the elements of rape, war and civil strife in the Arab world from ancient times until today. Centring on the contemporary case studies of Syria and Libya, it explains how rape, among other things, has been used as a deliberate strategy over the years and even in today's conflicts in the Middle East. In chapter fourteen, Ghoncheh Tazmini describes the domestic changes in Iran's modern history in the context of the country's modernization and reform. Moreover, it analyses how Iran is becoming more adaptive and less revolutionary as well as the implications of these developments for Tehran's foreign policy towards the broader Middle East and beyond. Next, Aharon Klieman in chapter fifteen deals with the importance of the Mediterranean for Israel since the Cold War and lists a number of contemporary economic, diplomatic and security-defence strategic opportunities and challenges for Israel on this front. Finally, Aristotle Tziampiris in chapter sixteen focuses on the new – and 'largely unexpected' (p. 244) – era of deeper Greek-Israeli relations and explains how energy, economy and security considerations played an

important role in bring this new phase about.

Though individual chapters may have some weaknesses – in terms of approach, scope or argument – the book as a project seems to have few flaws. The most important subjects in terms of the Eastern Mediterranean have been covered but a couple of issues could have found a place in this volume. One of them is Greek foreign policy and its perception of or vision in the Eastern Mediterranean in light of domestic and external challenges. Greece has been mentioned in different chapters, especially in Tziampiris' one, but the geopolitical position and importance of Greece arguably warrants more attention. In conjunction to Greece's role, a chapter could have been dedicated to the various efforts for inter-state cooperation as displayed through the trilateral partnerships or dialogues of Israel-Cyprus-Greece, Cyprus-Egypt-Greece and Jordan-Cyprus-Greece. Again, these have not been entirely neglected but their existence and dynamic alone constitutes an expression of multipolarity and affirms the rising importance of the Eastern Mediterranean; therefore, they could have been given more emphasis. Lastly, since the book covers the policies of the most important international actors (US, China, Russia) more analysis could have been provided on the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean for the EU and what is the latter's role – or what it can be – vis-à-vis this region considering its own existential political-economic problems.

The volume may not be specifically about Cyprus but is certainly relevant to it. Apart from a number of chapters that touch upon its foreign policy and role within the area of the Eastern Mediterranean, it becomes clear that one cannot discuss the geopolitics of the region without taking Cyprus into account. In this light the whole book can be of significant help to Cypriot policy-makers and citizens alike. In parallel, it is evident through the chapters that in the context of a decentralized and multipolar world the agency of smaller states becomes stronger and more significant, at least within their respective regional and sub-regional systems. This can be a wake-up call for Cyprus which should seize the geopolitical opportunity to increase its benefits in areas of growing regional and international interest – e.g. energy, economy and security – thus becoming a central and proactive geopolitical player, not merely subject and reactive to external developments.

Overall, the book as a whole is without a doubt a significant contribution to the study of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East as well. The chapters of the volume do not follow a common theoretical line or methodology of analysis, as this was not one of the aims set by the editors, and in fact, the theoretical and methodological pluralism that characterizes it adds great value to the better and multidimensional understanding of the Eastern Mediterranean and its various aspects. For instance, the book is not confined to traditional International Relations theories or systemic readings of international politics or foreign policy. The 'black-box' of the state is often opened up, the concept of security is scrutinized, the role of domestic politics

taken into account while the importance of ideational factors (e.g. identity, culture, ideology) are not neglected. Against this background, *The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition* certainly opens up avenues for further research with focus on either the Eastern Mediterranean itself, or on other such geopolitical sub-systems around the globe. Lastly, it constitutes another step towards understanding and decodifying the ever-changing international system especially at this historic juncture.

**ZENONAS TZIARRAS**



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