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The United States in the Eastern Mediterranean

STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS
OF ENERGY DIPLOMACY, SECURITY
POLITICS, AND ALIGNMENT SHIFTS

Sina Kisack & Erinc Bayri

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Abstract

Amid intensifying great-power rivalry and the growing geo-economic centrality of energy corridors, the Eastern Mediterranean has re-emerged as a pivotal arena of strategic contestation in the post-Cold War order. Against this backdrop, this study asks: How has U.S. policy shaped the evolving energy and security dynamics of the Eastern Mediterranean since the 2000s, and what has this meant for regional alignments—particularly with regard to Türkiye—and for competition with Russia and China? By addressing this question, the study seeks to assess not only Washington's strategic objectives and policy instruments, but also the broader implications of its engagement for regional order and great-power rivalry, using strategic landscape analysis as the guiding methodological framework along with case study and secondary resources. The findings indicate that U.S. policy has reshaped the Eastern Mediterranean's energy and security landscape primarily through security partnerships, legislative

initiatives, and calibrated military engagement rather than direct energy dependence. By strengthening ties with Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt, Washington has contributed to the consolidation of new regional alignments, while its strained relations with Türkiye—amid maritime disputes, defense tensions, and Syria policy divergences—have encouraged Ankara’s more autonomous and at times Russia-leaning posture. Simultaneously, U.S. efforts to counter Russian military entrenchment and limit China’s infrastructural and technological expansion have embedded the region more deeply within broader patterns of great-power competition, transforming the regional, if not global, energy security order.

Keywords

Eastern Mediterranean; energy security; great-power competition; maritime disputes; strategic landscape analysis

Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States sought to consolidate and expand its influence in the Mediterranean region through a combination of hard and soft power instruments. Lately, the discovery of substantial hydrocarbon reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, coupled with the upheavals triggered by the Arab uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, has elevated the strategic importance of the region in US geostrategy. At the same time, both regional and extra-regional powers—including Russia and China—have intensified their engagement, employing a range of diplomatic, economic, and military tools.

Against this backdrop, this study asks: How has U.S. policy shaped the evolving energy and security dynamics of the Eastern Mediterranean since the 2000s, and what has this meant for regional alignments—particularly with regard to Türkiye—and for competition with Russia and China? By addressing this question, the study seeks to assess not only Washington’s strategic objectives and policy instruments, but also the broader implications of its engagement for regional order and great-power rivalry, using strategic landscape analysis as the guiding methodological framework along-

side case study methodology and secondary sources. Strategic landscape analysis examines how an actor operates within a structured environment composed of political, security, economic, regulatory, technological, and institutional dimensions. Rather than treating policy decisions as isolated events, the method maps the broader strategic environment, identifies the key actors within it, analyzes how different structural layers interact, and assesses how these interactions generate shifts in alignment patterns. It emphasizes systematic environmental mapping, interconnections across domains, and the translation of structural developments into strategic positioning and realignment (Wright, 2022).

In applying this method, the study proceeds in three stages. First, it defines the evolving strategic landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean by examining structural drivers such as hydrocarbon discoveries, maritime jurisdiction disputes, institutional initiatives like the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), U.S. legislative measures (e.g., the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act), and the region's role as a geopolitical transit hub. Second, it maps how U.S. policy instruments—defense cooperation with Greece and Cyprus, security guarantees for Israel, selective engagement with Egypt, sanctions and arms decisions, and efforts to limit Russian and Chinese influence—have interacted with the strategic choices of other actors. Third, it evaluates the alignment consequences of these interactions, showing how U.S.-led coalition-building has reinforced certain regional blocs while contributing to Türkiye's strategic hedging and to increased Russian and Chinese penetration. Through this structured landscape mapping, the empirical analysis demonstrates how U.S. engagement has not only shaped the region's energy security order but also reconfigured patterns of cooperation and rivalry within an increasingly multipolar environment.

Within this framework, this article is structured in three sections. The first section examines the geopolitical, economic, and financial dimensions of energy security in the Eastern Mediterranean, analyzing hydrocarbon discoveries, maritime disputes, transit routes, and the strategic positioning of key regional actors. The second

section explores U.S. policies toward selected regional states, assessing how Washington's security partnerships, legislative initiatives, and military engagements have reshaped regional alignments and energy dynamics. The third section evaluates U.S. engagement vis-à-vis outer-regional powers, particularly Russia and China, highlighting how great-power competition has deepened multipolar contestation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Energy Diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean: Geopolitical, Economic, and Financial Dimensions

The energy politics of the Eastern Mediterranean, home to one of the prominent gas fields discovered in recent years, constitutes a highly strategic area in shaping economic and political balances (Gürcan, 2019). These fields are mostly concentrated around Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel, a concentration that establishes a crucial transit corridor between Europe and Asia and positions the region as one of the most important energy routes.

Geopolitical location is regarded as a significant factor influencing the demographic, political, economic, and even financial structures of states, regions, continents, and military zones. It plays a decisive role in shaping national economies, structuring trade relations and import–export agreements, influencing political conflicts and diplomatic negotiations, and even intensifying clashes of interest—alongside states' economic and military capabilities. In countries of strategic geopolitical importance, such as Türkiye, various political, economic, and security pressures are often employed in attempts to undermine or neutralize their locational advantages. These include terrorist incidents, economic pressure, and political isolation strategies. Today, a region of critical geopolitical value such as the Eastern Mediterranean is undergoing a process of reshaping within the international arena, resulting not only in the involvement of regional states but also in the growing desire of external powers to exert influence (Stergiou, 2023; Gürcan, 2021).

Türkiye, benefiting from the advantages of its geopolitical posi-

tion, is both one of the most critical transit hubs and one of the key actors within the Eastern Mediterranean energy corridor. This country provides the shortest, most reliable, and most cost-effective route for energy transfer to European states, serving as a crucial bridge to the European market. However, Türkiye's disputes with the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), Greece, and the European Union over maritime jurisdiction areas restrict its potential and frequently bring energy diplomacy to the forefront. Recently, Türkiye has signed a bilateral agreement with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and initiated energy exploration activities in the region. This development has repeatedly triggered disputes between Türkiye, Greece, and the Greek Cypriot Administration. Although at times the possibility of energy agreements with Egypt and Israel has been raised, ongoing instability and political dilemmas have postponed such prospects. Nonetheless, owing to its geopolitical significance as a bridge between Asia and Europe, and considering the issues of energy security and cost, Türkiye is expected in the long run to become one of the most important partners for European Union member states (Lavezzo, 2025).

In the RoC, the Aphrodite, Calypso, and Glaucus fields are frequently brought to the forefront, and due to the southern part of the island being an EU member, they are regarded as alternative energy sources particularly for EU countries. The RoC, especially under the shadow of conflicts of interest and diplomatic crises with the TRNC and Türkiye, seeks to portray its energy resources as a diplomatic advantage in order to further strengthen its relations with EU member states. However, the declarations by both Türkiye and the TRNC that they will not relinquish their legitimate rights and interests in the northern part of Cyprus obstruct the RoC's attempts to exploit regional energy resources, both through diplomatic means and, when deemed necessary, through military channels. This situation, overshadowed by the ongoing disputes among the relevant states, leaves unresolved the question of which route will be used to transport Cypriot gas. While the EastMed pipeline remains contentious due to financial and technical challenges, Egypt's LNG

facilities are considered a more feasible short-term alternative (İpek, 2025).

Egypt has emerged as one of the most significant regional actors thanks to the discovery of the massive Zohr gas field. The country's most prominent LNG facilities, Idku and Damietta, have enabled Egypt to position itself in the international arena as both a producer and an exporter within the energy sector. Furthermore, by hosting the headquarters of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), Egypt has assumed not only economic and financial roles in the energy domain but also political and diplomatic ones. At present, Egypt aims to enhance its diplomatic and bilateral relations with Israel, Cyprus, Greece, and EU countries by leveraging the energy sector, while simultaneously seeking to strengthen its foreign exchange reserves and achieve economic growth through the advantages derived from energy revenues. In addition, Egypt endeavors to meet its steadily growing domestic energy demand from its own resources (Giuli, 2021).

One of the significant energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean region is controlled by Israel. Particularly, the Tamar and Leviathan energy fields have made Israel one of the key energy actors in the region. By increasing its production capacity, Israel seeks first to meet domestic energy demand and subsequently to position itself among the energy-exporting countries. At present, Israel exports LNG to EU countries through Egypt, while also holding the potential to transfer energy via pipelines to Jordan and Egypt. Taking advantage of the tensions and disputes over gas supply disruptions between the EU and Russia, Israel aims to establish itself as an important alternative gas supplier for the EU. Although the idea of constructing a gas pipeline through Türkiye is considered a long-term economic option, the diplomatic uncertainties between the two countries currently prevent the realization of this project (Tüysüzöğlü, 2024; Eminel-Sülün, 2025).

Another country on the map is Lebanon. Struggling with economic and financial difficulties, Lebanon has faced challenges in developing its potential hydrocarbon resources, particularly due to disputes with Israel over maritime jurisdiction. These disagreements

were resolved in 2022 through U.S. mediation, which enabled international energy companies to sign cooperation agreements with Lebanon and initiate offshore exploration activities. While energy revenues are seen as a crucial factor for Lebanon in addressing its economic crises, political uncertainties may delay the country's ability to benefit from these revenues in the short term (Yorulmaz & Kısacık, 2022).

As noted above, in an effort to prevent diplomatic crises stemming from maritime jurisdiction disputes among Eastern Mediterranean states, countries have pursued bilateral maritime boundary agreements. However, since the distance between the coasts of countries in the region does not exceed 400 nautical miles, an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 200 nautical miles, as stipulated under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, is not feasible. Following the agreement signed between the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) and Egypt in February 2003, Türkiye rejected and did not recognize the treaty, as it disregarded the rights of Turkish Cypriots and treated the island as if it solely belonged to the RoC. Türkiye has also declared that its own maritime jurisdiction areas which are being violated. Furthermore, the RoC has signed maritime delimitation agreements with Lebanon in 2007 and with Israel in 2010, both of which escalated EEZ-related disputes. The Cyprus issue is regarded as the underlying factor behind these agreements. The process, which began in 1963 with the violation of Turkish Cypriots' constitutional rights by Greek Cypriots, continues today with the division of the island into two parts and the lack of mutual recognition between the North and the South in the international arena. Moreover, platforms such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) continue to regard the island as a single entity and recognize only the RoC as the official authority, which remains a key source of disputes between Türkiye and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) (Kökay, 2021).

Today, the Eastern Mediterranean constitutes a significant commercial region of such scale that it enhances the strategic depth of the Suez Canal. As previously noted, this situation renders the region a focal point of attraction not only for the littoral states but

also for major global energy actors such as the United States, Russia, China, and even the European Union. This importance is not confined to the region's geopolitical position but also encompasses its economic, financial, trade, and political significance.

The region, by virtue of the Suez Canal serving as a link between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, has become an appealing hub for ensuring safe, rapid, and cost-efficient trade between Asia and Europe. With the expansion of the Suez Canal, trade volume has nearly doubled, and transit times have been significantly reduced. Today, the Eastern Mediterranean constitutes a crucial center of trade circulation: it connects to the Black Sea via the Turkish Straits, to the Western Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean through the Strait of Sicily and the Strait of Messina, and to the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea through the Suez Canal. As such, the Eastern Mediterranean also occupies a vital geopolitical position, bridging the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans (Şeker, 2018).

At present, in the Eastern Mediterranean region, projects concerning the efficient and effective utilization of financial resources throughout all stages—from the exploration of potential gas reserves to their processing and integration into international markets—frequently come to the fore. From the discovery of natural gas resources to their production and export, joint projects aimed at enhancing profitability are also being discussed among states. The establishment, storage, and cross-border transfer of power plants, liquefied natural gas (LNG) facilities, and compressed natural gas (CNG) plants are expected to contribute significantly to national economies (Kökyay, 2021).

Energy serves not only as a means of establishing diplomatic relations but also as an instrument in the formation of energy diplomacy itself. Energy discoveries act as decisive factors in shaping political and economic relations. The discoveries made in the Eastern Mediterranean substantially influence the trajectory of the region's economic and political climate. Exploration activities and energy discoveries in this area may either heighten or ease tensions among countries. Foreign direct investments by leading energy firms

can exert positive effects on national economies. However, in regions marked by political uncertainty and conflict, major energy companies refrain from investing, and banks face considerable difficulty in providing financing (Kansu, 2019).

Assuming that the fundamental philosophy of companies in the global economic order is sustainable profitability, it appears inevitable that major energy investors will refrain from regions experiencing political instability. Nevertheless, in certain cases, the notion of maximizing interests through joint economic cooperation may help to resolve political instabilities. However, when examining the current landscape, it becomes evident that the establishment of energy cooperation and the alignment of economic interests on a common ground do not always provide an absolute guarantee for peace. In the Eastern Mediterranean region today, disputes over Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and energy exploration activities, in particular, have at times escalated tensions among regional states, thereby frequently bringing energy diplomacy to the forefront. It is evident that the Eastern Mediterranean will continue to be an important hub not only for the littoral states but also for countries seeking to monopolize the energy market within the capitalist system.

U.S. Strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean and Its Engagement with Regional Actors

During the Cold War, Washington had seen the Eastern Mediterranean as a strategic pivot, as the area was a vital fragment of the broader Mediterranean (Dalacoura, 2018). Yet, after the Cold War, as the U.S. has acquired energy independence thanks to the advancement of shale gas and oil, the calculated standing of the Mediterranean (and the Eastern Mediterranean as component of it) for the U.S. has diminished. U.S. strategic attention has increasingly shifted toward containing China's rise, with the Asia-Pacific now serving as a primary focus of Washington's foreign policy. The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy identifies China and Russia as the primary strategic competitors challenging American power, influ-

ence, and interests, and seeking to undermine U.S. security and prosperity (Demir, 2024a; Demir, 2024b).

This being said, the 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America states that “*the United States seeks a Mediterranean that does not serve as a safe haven or strategic base for jihadist terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the U.S., and contributes to a stable global energy market*” (The President of the United States, 2017, p. 48). Therefore, the U.S. pivot to Asia does not automatically imply a U.S. retrenchment from the Eastern Mediterranean. The U.S. sustains close bonds with its local partners and stays involved within the area, nonetheless more indirectly as compared with the past. Egypt, Greece, Israel, and Türkiye remain crucial partners of the U.S. within the Eastern Mediterranean. Israel’s safety stands the outmost U.S. concern, whereas Greece and Türkiye stand NATO partners holding durable consensual bonds with the U.S. While Washington has narrowed its dependence on hard power instruments in this geography, the U.S. Sixth Fleet is still active within the Eastern Mediterranean. The U.S. Eastern Mediterranean forces have been reinforced in an answer to the conflict that followed Hamas’s attack towards Israel as of October 2023 (Kocadal, 2025).

At the end of December 2020, Washington has approved the bipartisan Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act (US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2019), eliminating the limitations concerning the exportation of non-lethal security equipment to Southern Nicosia (SN) annually, and partially abandoned more than three-decade weapons’ sales prohibition (Miller, 2023), while establishing an Energy Centre with the intention of furthering cooperation with Athens and Southern Nicosia (Kontos & Georgiou, 2023). Moreover, the U.S. has also committed to providing International Military Education and Training on the way to the Greek Cypriot Administration of the Republic of Cyprus (U.S. Department of Energy, 2020). 70 OH-58D Kiowa Warrior inspection helicopters and one CH-47 Chinook helicopter from Washington were to be procured by Athens within the first months of 2019 (Valine, 2019; Global Defense News Army Recognition Group, 2017). In return, the U.S. has been able to get an armed

facility from Greek side in Alexandroupolis, almost 50 kilometers from Türkiye via an armed arrangement signed at the end of 2021 (King, 2024). Additionally, Washington has agreed to export 4 mint frigates totaling nearly 7 billion US dollars, accompanied by frigate-upgrading mission towards Greek Navy amounting to more than 2 billion US Dollars in 2021 (Hill, 2024). Meanwhile, Türkiye has requested from the U.S. to reevaluate its fractional abandoning of the arms embargo on the Greek Cypriot Administration of the Republic of Cyprus, cautioning that this might alter “equivalence and steadiness” between the Turkish and Greek Cypriots (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). As stipulated in H.R. 1865—the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020—the U.S. Congress lifted the arms embargo imposed on the Republic of Cyprus in 1987, a decision that was strongly criticized by the TRNC and Türkiye (Örmeci & Kısacık, 2020).

U.S. military and political support, coupled with the perception that Washington disregards Türkiye’s security concerns and regional interests while favoring the PYD/YPG—an offshoot of the PKK, which Türkiye designates as a terrorist organization—over its NATO ally, has negatively affected the United States’ public image in Türkiye. Accordingly, while the United States and other Western countries have strongly opposed Türkiye’s military operations in northern Syria (Sarı-Karademir, 2019), Russia—despite controlling much of the airspace—has largely refrained from direct intervention. Ankara has coordinated with Moscow and Tehran through the Astana and Sochi processes to delineate areas of control in northern Syria, despite their broader support for the Syrian government differing from Türkiye’s position (Tüysüzoğlu, 2025).

Following 1979, Türkiye had emerged as Israel’s principal non-Arab regional counterpart within the framework of U.S. Middle East strategy, a role previously associated with Iran (Ghariani, 2023). However, the United States and Israel designate Hamas as a terrorist organization, whereas successive AK Party governments in Türkiye have described Hamas as the legitimate, democratically elected representative of the Palestinians. Israel’s use of force against Palestinians and the status of Jerusalem remain deeply

contentious issues between Ankara and Tel Aviv. Türkiye does not recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and maintains that the city's status should be resolved within the framework of a final settlement to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, with Jerusalem serving as the capital of both states. This position commands broad public support in Türkiye and represents a significant political and symbolic threshold in bilateral relations (Shakovskaya et al., 2023).

In March 2013, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu formally apologized for the 2010 Gaza flotilla incident, and in December 2016 the two countries reached a normalization agreement, which was subsequently approved by both parliaments. Under this agreement, Israel allowed Türkiye to implement humanitarian projects in the Gaza Strip and agreed to pay \$20 million in compensation to the families of those killed and injured in the raid, leading to the restoration of diplomatic relations and the reappointment of ambassadors. However, in May 2018, Israeli forces opened fire on Palestinian protesters in Gaza following the U.S. decision to relocate its embassy to Jerusalem. In response, Turkish President Erdoğan described Israel as a “terrorist state.” Progress in the Israeli–Palestinian peace process remains essential for stabilizing Turkish–Israeli relations (Erdoğan-Şafak, 2024).

Beyond Turkish–Israeli tensions, disputes between Türkiye and Greece have constituted another major axis of instability in the Eastern Mediterranean. Tensions have intensified due to the absence of a comprehensive maritime delimitation agreement between Greece and Türkiye in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. The failure of the 2017 Crans-Montana talks further increased the risk of spillover escalation. Ankara subsequently adopted a more rigid stance, rejecting negotiation frameworks based on the UN's vision of political equality between the two communities and territorial arrangements on Cyprus. It has supported Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar, who advocates a two-state solution, and has partially reopened Varosha, a coastal district of Famagusta that has remained under Turkish military control since the 1970s. These developments have unfolded alongside the deterioration of U.S.–Türkiye relations, reducing prospects for

compromise and increasing the likelihood of confrontation. The discovery of hydrocarbon resources, which could have incentivized cooperation, instead exacerbated disputes over maritime boundaries, energy exploration, and pipeline routes, encouraging zero-sum strategies. In this context, the Cyprus–Greece–Egypt and Cyprus–Greece–Israel alignments have evolved into de facto counterbalancing groupings against Türkiye, reinforcing Greek confidence while heightening Turkish threat perceptions (Şahin, 2024).

By August 2020, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale argued that the development of Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbons would “guarantee long-term energy security and economic prosperity across the region” (Kocadal, 2025). However, in April 2022, then–Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland expressed skepticism toward the proposed EastMed pipeline, describing it as economically and technically unviable. The U.S. withdrawal of support for EastMed increased the strategic relevance of the proposed Israel–Türkiye Pipeline (ITP) as a more feasible alternative for transporting gas from Israel and Cyprus to Europe. Estimated at roughly \$2 billion—less than half the projected cost of EastMed—the ITP could connect to the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), facilitating onward transmission to European markets. Nevertheless, strained Türkiye–Israel relations, particularly in the context of the Gaza conflict, have hindered progress on this option (Kocadal, 2025).

Finally, disputes over maritime jurisdiction and drilling activities around Cyprus have further escalated tensions between Türkiye and the EU–U.S. axis. Ankara has rejected the EU-backed Seville Map on the grounds that it reflects maximalist Greek claims and infringes upon Turkish maritime rights. In response, Türkiye signed a maritime delimitation agreement with Libya’s interim government, directly challenging Greek interpretations of maritime boundaries. Consistent with the “Blue Homeland” doctrine (Gürcan, 2021), Türkiye has opposed drilling licenses granted by the Republic of Cyprus in areas it considers to fall within its own continental shelf and has issued NAVTEX notices while deploying drilling vessels and naval escorts to assert its claims. The exclusion of Türkiye from the

Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) and the EastMed pipeline initiative has further reinforced Ankara's perception of encirclement. While Türkiye has pursued assertive policies to defend its interests, it has also demonstrated a capacity to de-escalate—suspending drilling activities, withdrawing naval assets from contested areas, and re-engaging diplomatically with Athens—when broader strategic considerations require it (Tüysüzöğlü, 2025).

In sum, U.S. engagement with the Eastern Mediterranean reflects neither full retrenchment nor unqualified dominance, but rather a calibrated strategy designed to preserve influence amid shifting regional and global dynamics. By deepening security cooperation with Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, and Israel while maintaining strategic ties with Egypt, Washington has reinforced a networked alignment structure that both stabilizes certain partnerships and intensifies friction with Türkiye. Legislative initiatives, defense agreements, and selective military deployments demonstrate that the United States continues to view the region through a security-centered lens, even as its broader strategic focus pivots toward great-power competition with China and Russia. Yet this approach has produced unintended consequences: it has contributed to Türkiye's strategic hedging behavior, complicated alliance cohesion within NATO, and embedded Eastern Mediterranean energy diplomacy within a wider framework of geopolitical rivalry. Rather than functioning solely as a zone of energy cooperation, the region has increasingly become a testing ground for competing security visions and alignment configurations.

U.S. Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean: Engagement with Extra-Regional Powers

The Syrian conflict (2011-2025) has evolved into a key arena in the Eastern Mediterranean where Russia and the United States have competed for influence while occasionally being compelled to coordinate. Since Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015, Moscow has significantly expanded its presence, whereas the United States has primarily focused on countering ISIS through local oppo-

sition forces. Cooperation between Russia and the U.S. has remained limited, largely confined to deconfliction mechanisms and coordination over airspace use in counterterrorism operations. However, the reconfiguration of the regional landscape following the partial withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2019 enabled Russia to further consolidate its influence in Syria. This arrangement remains fragile, given the presence of U.S.-backed Kurdish forces and Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria, which complicate the strategic calculations of both major powers (İnaç & Kına, 2025).

Türkiye's rapprochement with Russia over the past decade can partly be understood as an attempt to balance between Russia and the West in an increasingly multipolar international system. The failed coup attempt in July 2016 marked a turning point, accelerating Ankara's closer engagement with Moscow. Russia's swift and explicit support for the Turkish government during the coup attempt—combined with Ankara's suspicions regarding U.S. involvement—encouraged Türkiye to deepen ties with Russia, particularly in the interest of regime security. Moscow, in turn, provided political backing during Erdoğan's 2023 presidential and parliamentary election campaign. Despite remaining a NATO member and benefiting from alliance security guarantees, Türkiye's growing closeness to Russia strained its relations with traditional Western partners. Notably, Türkiye's 2017 decision to purchase the Russian S-400 air defense system led to its removal from the U.S. F-35 program and the imposition of CAATSA sanctions in 2020. As a result, Türkiye—despite being a NATO member—was placed under sanctions alongside Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. Although Türkiye's approval of Sweden's NATO membership in January 2024 paved the way for U.S. approval of F-16 sales to Ankara, this move was offset by Washington's parallel expansion of F-35 sales to Greece. Originally, Türkiye had planned to acquire nearly 100 F-35 aircraft to modernize its air force. The deterioration of U.S.–Türkiye relations has extended beyond defense procurement, also resulting in Türkiye's exclusion from U.S.-led multilateral initiatives such as the I2U2 Initiative, which seeks to enhance economic integration across the Middle East and beyond. This

strain has contributed to a closer U.S. alignment with Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean, as reflected in the defense agreement signed between Cyprus and the United States on September 9, 2024 (Aydın-Düzgüt et al., 2025).

Washington has also warned Cairo about the potential consequences of acquiring Russia's Sukhoi-35 multi-role fighter aircraft, cautioning that such a purchase could trigger CAATSA sanctions and complicate U.S. defense cooperation and security assistance to Egypt. Although Egypt initially sought to purchase 20 aircraft and reportedly received five, it ultimately reversed its decision. In return, the United States approved upgrades to Egypt's AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopters (Schenker & Trager, 2014; Iddon, 2021).

In parallel, China's growing interest in the Mediterranean has expanded beyond securing energy supplies, reflecting broader transformations in regional and global dynamics over the past decade. The Mediterranean has become a strategic linkage zone connecting Chinese foreign policy objectives across South Asia, Eurasia, Europe, and Africa. Within China's broader geopolitical framework, Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia are often conceptualized as part of a wider Western Asia space. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 further integrated the Mediterranean into China's strategic vision. Through infrastructure and transportation corridors—including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Middle Corridor involving Türkiye and Gulf states—the Mediterranean has emerged as a logistical hub in China's expanding trade network (Yüce, 2022; Gürcan, 2021).

According to China's 2016 Arab Policy Paper, Beijing's priorities in the Middle East and Mediterranean include economic cooperation, energy security, counterterrorism, regional stability, technological collaboration, and BRI implementation. China's policy framework emphasizes fossil fuel cooperation supported by infrastructure and trade, alongside future plans to expand cooperation in nuclear energy, renewable technologies, and satellite systems. Beijing has elevated its ties with several Middle Eastern states to the level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships and has strengthened

engagement with multilateral bodies such as the Arab League and the China–Gulf Cooperation Forum. As a result, China’s earlier “non-interventionist” or “baggage-free” diplomacy—characteristic of the 2000s—has gradually evolved into a more active and strategically engaged regional posture (Yüce, 2022).

In seeking to link the Eurasian continent from East to West, China has incorporated Iran, Türkiye, Israel, and Egypt into its BRI framework and supported Saudi Arabia’s transformation into a major logistics hub through railway and infrastructure projects. The Mediterranean, in this context, is viewed as a critical node where the “Belt” connects to the “Road.” Through strategic port investments and major infrastructure projects in countries such as Pakistan, Egypt, Türkiye, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, China has enhanced its influence across the Eurasia–Africa–Middle East nexus (Gürel & Kozluca, 2022; Durmaz, 2025). Its deepening strategic partnership with Egypt since 2014 has significantly increased Chinese investment in the Suez Canal Economic Zone. As U.S. influence in the region shows signs of relative decline, Egypt’s expanding ties with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union, combined with its pivotal maritime location, position China–Egypt relations within a broader framework of intensifying great-power competition (Zreik, 2024; Gülseven, 2022). Egypt and Algeria, in particular, are viewed by Beijing as “strategic pivots” capable of serving as conduits of Chinese influence across military, economic, political, and ideological domains (Güçyetmez & Kısacık, 2025).

During the first Trump administration, the United States restricted the sale of advanced semiconductor technologies to Chinese firms such as Huawei and ZTE. Washington also warned Mediterranean partners about the potential security risks associated with Huawei’s 5G infrastructure. However, the United States was unable to prevent key regional partners—including Türkiye and Egypt—from cooperating with Huawei in developing 5G networks (Kontos & Georgiou, 2023; Chenga & Zeng, 2024; Örmeci et al., 2024). The U.S. also expressed concerns about Chinese involvement in Israel’s Port of Haifa, but Israeli authorities declined Washing-

ton's proposal for direct inspections (Egozi, 2021). In response to growing Chinese economic influence, the United States has expanded its strategic presence in Greece, increasing access to bases and ports. Although enhanced U.S.–Greece security cooperation has constrained some aspects of Chinese expansion, it has not entirely displaced Chinese economic influence (Karamouzi, 2022; U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Greece, 2024). China continues to develop the Port of Piraeus as a major container hub in the Eastern Mediterranean and one of Europe's key maritime gateways. Greece, for its part, has sought to maintain balanced relations, sustaining high-level engagement with both Washington and Beijing (He, 2019).

Overall, U.S. engagement with extra-regional powers in the Eastern Mediterranean illustrates how the region has become embedded within broader patterns of great-power competition. While Washington seeks to contain Russian military entrenchment and limit China's expanding economic and technological footprint, its policies have simultaneously reshaped regional alignments and complicated relations with key actors such as Türkiye and Egypt. Russia's consolidation in Syria and China's infrastructural expansion through the Belt and Road Initiative have transformed the Eastern Mediterranean into a strategic intersection of military positioning, energy routes, and logistical corridors. In this environment, U.S. policy reflects a balancing act—aimed at preserving strategic influence without direct overextension—yet the cumulative effect has been the deepening of multipolar contestation rather than the stabilization of a clear regional order.

Conclusion

The United States has long maintained a presence in the Mediterranean. With the growing strategic significance of the Eastern Mediterranean—driven by the discovery of substantial hydrocarbon reserves and the presence of critical maritime chokepoints—the region has regained importance in U.S. strategic calculations. Israel's security, which Washington prioritizes consistently and

unequivocally, further reinforces the region's importance. To sustain its influence, the United States has employed a range of power instruments, including the deployment of naval and air assets to demonstrate its presence, diplomatic engagement, support for U.S. companies' civilian initiatives, and the formation of multilateral partnerships with key Eastern Mediterranean states. Across the broader Middle East and North Africa region, successive U.S. administrations have worked to ensure a secure strategic environment for Israel. Washington has cooperated closely with pro-Western regional allies such as Jordan and Egypt to advance these objectives. The dynamics of the recent Israel–Gaza war illustrate this pattern of alignment. While relatively few states have openly criticized Israel's large-scale military operations despite concerns regarding international law, many regional actors and observers worldwide have characterized these actions as constituting genocide.

In recent years, particularly in the context of the fight against DAESH in Syria and Iraq, Ankara and Washington have frequently found themselves at odds. Ankara maintains that it has been the only actor directly confronting DAESH on the ground, while it strongly objects to Washington's cooperation with the PYD/YPG, which Türkiye designates as an offshoot of the PKK terrorist organization. From Ankara's perspective, combating one terrorist organization by relying on another is both unethical and inconsistent with international norms, and it undermines the spirit of alliance within NATO. In contrast, the United States has supported Greece's initiatives in the Eastern Mediterranean across military and energy domains. Within this framework, Washington and Athens have expanded their cooperation, including alignment with Cairo and other regional capitals. At the same time, the United States has sought to counterbalance Türkiye's proactive foreign and energy policies, as well as its security maneuvers, while also limiting Russian political, economic, and military influence and China's growing presence—particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative—in order to preserve its strategic position in the region.

In conclusion, in order to sustain its strategic visibility and influence in the Eastern Mediterranean in the twenty-first century,

Washington continues to rely on a combination of hard and soft power tools, reinforced by coalition-building with states whose interests align with its own. Conversely, regional actors—most notably Türkiye—who perceive themselves as excluded from certain U.S.-led initiatives have sought to diversify their partnerships, strengthening ties with Libya, Syria, and Egypt while remaining receptive to Russian and Chinese engagement in the Mediterranean. Both Russia and China have established significant footholds in the region through various political, economic, and strategic initiatives, and their presence is likely to expand further. Ultimately, Washington's proactive policies in the Eastern Mediterranean are generating not only new regional alliances but also intensifying rivalries, as external powers such as Russia and China continue to shape the evolving balance of power in the region.

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