

# **The strategic importance of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea**

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Cyprus's geographic location is of great importance not only for the Mediterranean region but is also critical for international security. *The question is: How could a small state be so important for regional and international stability in terms of security?* A simplistic answer would be that at a macro-level, Taiwan plays an also disproportionate role in world politics because of its importance for both China and the U.S. Being at the crossroads among Europe, Africa, and Asia, Cyprus is an important security and energy hub and its foreign policy contributes to the peace and stability of several subregions such as MENA and Southeastern Mediterranean. *What is the perception of superpowers, great powers, and middle powers towards Cyprus, and what Cyprus offers in regional stability?*

## ***The American perspective: Deterring the Russian naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean***

The ongoing augmentation of Russian influence in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean obliges Washington to have no second thoughts about abandoning or not key states for the American interests in the region. This hypothesis could be proved by the last visit of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Nicosia in September 2020. During this visit, the U.S. signed with Cyprus an MoU that permits the U.S. to fund a training facility named ***Center for Land, Open Seas, and Port Security (CYCLOPS)***. This training facilitation has its main purpose in facing the malign influence of asymmetric actors that threaten peace and stability in the region.

Furthermore, the U.S. administration has already partly lifted the embargo against Cyprus so the Cypriot government could have access to non-lethal weapons. The U.S. strategy towards the Greater Middle East is passing through a time of reconciliation with the idea that Washington is not the lone superpower in the region. The U.S. withdrawal from Syria coexists with the American political priority to reduce the Russian influence not only in Syria but in the Greater Middle East.

To deter the projection of Russian naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, the American officials try to engage with states that are linchpins of stability. Cyprus is a crucial state for that kind of strategy because it fulfills the American prerequisites (democratic political system, membership in the E.U., and aligned with American energy policy). One of the greatest hydrocarbon companies in the world, Exxon Mobil has bought the rights to exploit the significant deposits of natural gas in fields that are of Cyprus jurisdiction. Last but not least, Cyprus is an official partner of NATO and hosts critical military bases of the United Kingdom.

### ***The E.U. and the potential European strategic autonomy pass through Cyprus***

After the recent German elections, the three political parties in Germany that agreed to build a governmental coalition declared that they aim to boost the common European plan of the “United States of Europe”. The Federal European State is not new as a vision and the French presidency in the European Union will try to find common ground with Berlin to accomplish the fifth stage of European Unification. France is keen on Cyprus and has recently signed a military agreement with Cyprus which facilitates the French navy to dock in Cypriot ports. French foreign policy rests on three axes.

Foremost, to fill the defensive and security gap of the E.U. after Brexit. Second, to project its influence in the Middle East and North Africa by using its economic and cultural ties with states that were under the French Occupation in the Colonial Era. Finally, France aims to design a European “independent European voice” when it comes to foreign affairs issues. A “strategic autonomous” Europe is the vision of French President Emmanuel Macron. Cyprus is at the nexus of the French strategic priorities and the bilateral relations between Paris and Nicosia are of greater importance due to the energy colossus of TOTAL in the Cyprus EEZ. French strategic priorities are threatened directly by Turkey and Iran, and Paris is supportive of Cyprus in the Cyprus Issue. In case of a successful ending of the “United States of Europe”, Cyprus simultaneously becomes the eastern frontier of the E.U.

## *Israel and Egypt.*

Cyprus has never abolished its strategic importance, even when the Cyprus Issue is still an impasse for the international community. From Israel's view, only a few have been changed since 1948. The "Ben Gurion Doctrine" is the basis of Israel's grand strategy. Jerusalem's anxiety of being encircled by Muslim powers obliges the small state of Israel to gain strategic depth.

The crisis of Israel-Turkish relations followed the end of the strategic triangle (U.S.-Israel-Turkey) in the Middle East and Israel felt that, except Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran, had also to confront Turkey. In geo-economic terms, the simultaneous finding of energy deposits in Cyprus and Israel's EEZ was a remarkable opportunity for Israel to engage with Cyprus and Greece in terms of security. *On many aspects, the western geostrategic depth of Israel depends on the stability of Cyprus.* Both countries conducted common military exercises, and this decision expresses clarity about the existence of a community of interests in the security sector that both states share.

For Egypt, the priorities for the powerhouse of the Arab World are loud and sound. The Al Sisi administration has to deal with several regional conflicts. In South Egypt, a potential radicalization of Northern Sudan threatens directly the security of Egypt.

Moreover, problems between Ethiopia and Egypt regarding the "war for water" make the cohesion of Egypt even more unrest. On the western front, there is the civil war in Libya, and in the summer of 2020, Egypt warned of a potential military invasion in Libya in case of GNA's further expansion in Eastern Libya.

As it happens with Israel, so it happens with the Turkish-Egyptian relations. Turkey supports the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and that kind of policy poses an existential threat to the current Egyptian administration. In Cyprus, Egypt finds a pillar of stability in a region and a pro-Egyptian member-state of the E.U. Using the warm relations among Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece, Sisi tries to augment Cairo's energy and political influence in the E.U. Egypt and Cyprus are member-states in the East Med Gas Forum and both share strong bonds with France. Regarding the E.U., the energy diversification policy opens another window of opportunity for Egypt. Euro-Africa Interconnector aims to supply electrical energy to Cyprus and Greece.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

To sum up, **Cyprus** is, as *the American Congress describes in the “Eastern Mediterranean for Security and Energy Act of 2019,”* a **“key-state”** in the region. Superpowers such as the U.S. and Russia, but also great powers like France, try to augment their presence in Cyprus. In addition, other meddlers of the region, like Egypt, Israel, and Turkey, have their own agenda about Cyprus.