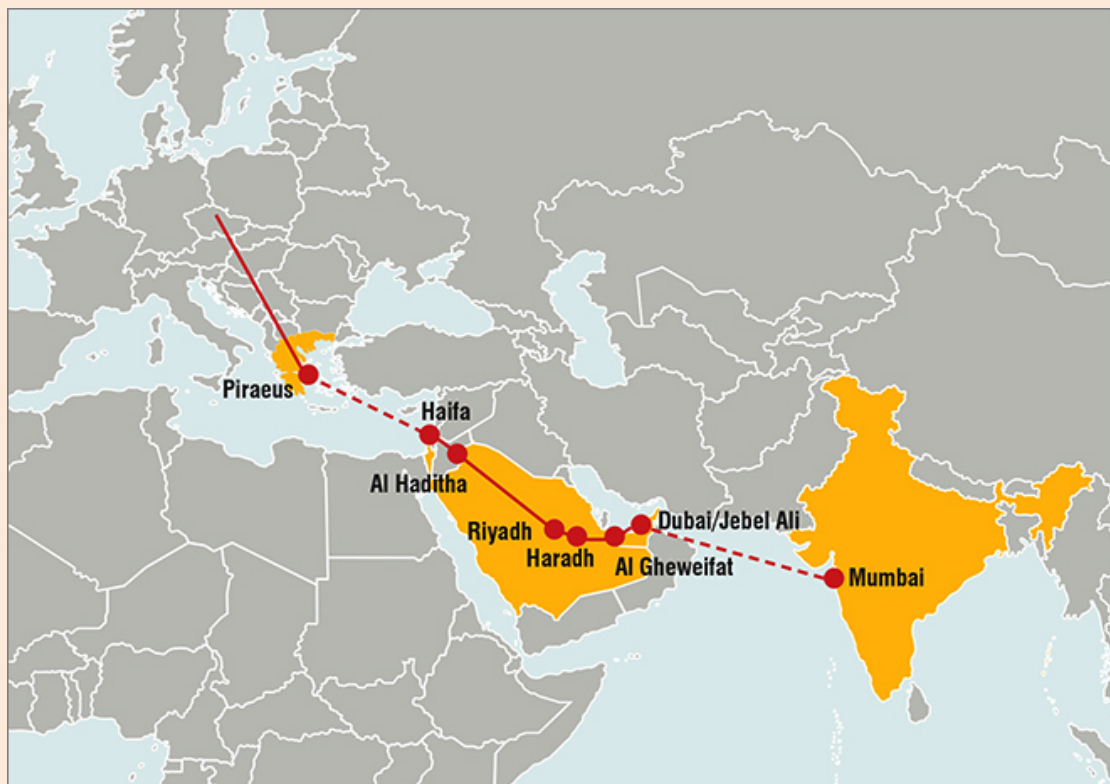


GREECE'S TRANS-MEDITERANEAN GEOSTRATEGY

The reconfiguration of the country into EU trans-Mediterranean energy, trade, and security gatekeeper



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GREECE'S TRANS-MEDITERANEAN GEOSTRATEGY

The “Clash of Civilizations” Samuel Huntington’s theory precluded twenty years ago the possibility of a direct Europe-Arab World confrontation. Such an option now seems to shift with the emergence of new global and regional powers, eager to fill the political vacuum of United States partial retrenchment from the Middle East region. The United States President, solemnly declares that “America is back” in the Euro-Atlantic chessboard, though Turkey’s geopolitical and military power projections, US-Russia rivalry, Russia’s return in the Mediterranean as a strong power player, and China’s “One Belt One Road” initiative - as for now only interested in business prone new alliances-, are changing the region’s set-up. Containing the 21st century new land power, China, from dominating Eurasia’s Rimland from the South China Sea, along the Indian Ocean, to the Mediterranean, seems to be the West new world strategy.

In 1987, the US Army College coined the acronym “VUCA” to describe the context of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity created with the end of the Cold War. Today, there is no more appropriate concept than that to describe the geopolitical situation of the Mediterranean region. The interests of Eastern Mediterranean (EM) littoral states cross with unusual activism from the Gulf countries—primarily United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar—as well as Russia. Libya and the Mediterranean (central and eastern), are the primary theatres in which new alliances are formed in a tangle that has been further complicated by the intertwining of various dynamics taking place in the area [1].

The Mediterranean in the post Cold War era, has lost its WWI, II and “Cold War” centrality from the Indo-Pacific US-China rivalry gravitation strategic center. The new geopolitical tensions epicenter is thereon positioned between the Sea of China and the north Indian Ocean, departure point of the Persian Gulf hydrocarbons, vital for the Middle Empire’s world power ambitions. Therefore, the Mediterranean is no more essential for the two super-powers, although it remains important for China’s easy access to the European markets, for Israel protection by the US and for quick eventual aid to its Indo-Pacific forces. Finally for both US and China, the Mediterranean remains the ideal site for Eurasian blocks’ frictions control, the Middle Eastern and the African one. The Mediterranean maintains its particular geopolitical importance as it remains a structural tension zone.

The Indian Ocean-Middle East-Eastern Mediterranean-Europe corridor

The geopolitics of the Asia, Africa and Europe confluence witnessed in 2010’s political, socio-economic and security developments, led to the intersection of many international and regional interests within the EM and Red Sea region (EMRS). Those two areas –connected through the Suez Canal- were traditionally seen as independent domains before having become interrelated recently by a multitude of international dynamics. The interests of the states bordering this region, cross with an unusual activism of the Gulf countries –United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the first place- and Russia. Libya and the Mediterranean (central and eastern), are the main theaters in which new alliances are formed, and this tangle has been further complicated by the inter-wining of the dynamics that take place there [2].

Gulf States involve in EMRS matters, including lending support to the Kurds of Syria and standing by Egypt, Greece and Cyprus against Turkish aggression. UAE offered military and intelligence cooperation to Israel against common adversaries like Turkey, Iran and Islamist movements, after having established full diplomatic ties with Tel Aviv ("Abraham Accords Peace Agreement", 2018). Summing up, UAE and Saudi Arabia's status quo states support -especially to Egypt-, creates an ideological gap which separates these countries from the Qatari government -mainly Muslim Brotherhood- Political Islam backing. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi stand also against the revisionist and expansionist Iran foreign policy toward the Arab countries, and Turkey's strategies aiming to achieve political leadership in the Muslim world [3].

The Gulf region, as being India's maritime neighbor, is often referred as "extended neighborhood", a relationship mirrored in oil and gas imports and trade. Additionally, Persian Gulf's geostrategic significance is linked to western Indian Ocean maritime security, the international oil market stability and the fight against terrorist organizations, all factors that make the Gulf vital for international security. However, the Gulf region is lacking regional architecture and balance of power. Astride to US role as a security provider, the Gulf region maintains growing bilateral security cooperation -particularly in the maritime sector- with India.

Distinctively, UAE aims to contain Turkish assertiveness in EMRS by strengthening ties with France -whose regional interests oppose Ankara's expansionism particularly in Western Africa and Sahel-, and cooperates closely with Greece and Cyprus, so as to isolate and contain Turkey's messing up in its Arab neighbors internal affairs. Abu Dhabi also seeks to boost its strategic importance to the European Union (EU), and has tightened its relations with Israel. "By signing the US

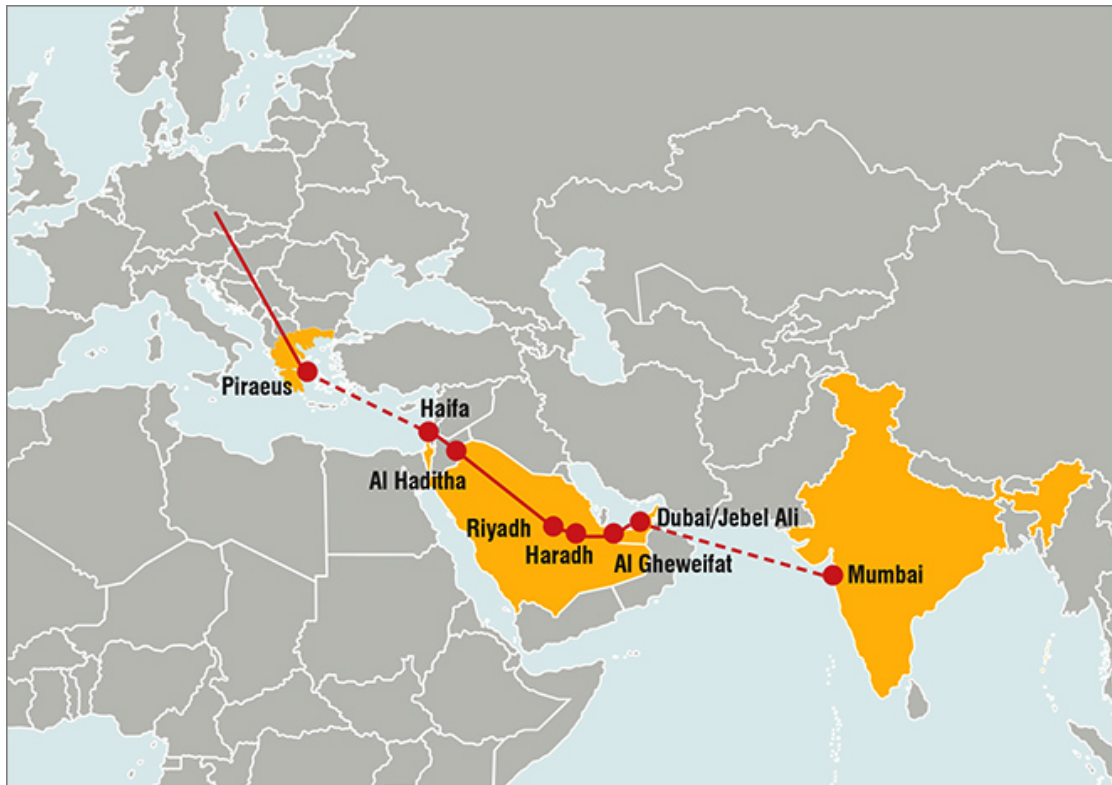
sponsored 'Abraham Accords' with Israel (2020), UAE aim to solidify its foothold in the Mediterranean and broaden its regional alliances amid increasing Turkish and Iranian interventions and a growing perception that America is distancing itself from the Middle East" [4].

Equally, Greece all along the 2010's -facing in particular after 2016 an irredentist and aggressive Turkey-, has been striving along with the Republic of Cyprus to build trilateral energy and security synergies with the country's Middle Eastern and Levantine neighbors (Israel, Egypt, Jordan), under the aegis and support of the United States policy in the region. This strategy culminated in the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF, 2020), in which Western states and entities (Italy, France, US, EU) and Middle Eastern ones (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Palestine) are trying to create a regional gas market, rationalize the cost of infrastructure, offer competitive prices, in other words collectively monetize and export the EM hydrocarbon deposits. In the 2020's, similarly Greece's deepening of political and security relations with Gulf states (United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain) occurred [5]. Greece's pivot towards the Middle East, reveal her claim for acquiring a strategic role on economic and political issues between the European Union and EM countries. This could enable Greece's rise as a trans-Mediterranean power, bringing Europe closer to East Africa and Gulf states via East Africa to Europe and Middle East to Europe manufacturing value chains, or allow Athens to serve as a critical node of Euro-Africa connectivity.

The Hellenic Republic series of diplomatic openness reached its apex when Athens hosted the early 2021 foreign ministerial-level Greek and Arab states summit "Philia (friendship) Forum", that highlighted these countries converging interest in mitigating the threats emerging from Turkish interventions in Syria and Libya. This convergence was clearly

demonstrated in August 2020 when the Egyptian navy and the UAE Air Force conducted concurrent joint exercises with the Hellenic Navy and Air Force, thus showing support for Greece in the height of Athens stand-off with Turkey in the EM [6].

Yet, as M. Tanchum stipulates, “the strategic significance of Greece’s convening of the Philia Forum extends far beyond the assembled nations shared concerns over Turkey’s foreign policy”. The summit, which emphasized deepening economic, technological and cultural cooperation, symbolized how Greece is poised to become one of continental Europe’s leading actors in forging the 21st century’s new trans-Mediterranean connectivity- the emerging nexus of energy transit routes and commercial transportation corridors that connect Europe, Africa, and the Middle East [7]. UAE-Israel diplomatic normalization permitted the rail juncture of the two countries via Saudi Arabia and Jordan to the Mediterranean Israeli port of Haifa. Combined with the trans -Mediterranean maritime link of Haifa to Piraeus (Greece), India’s maritime connectivity with the UAE will soon form part of a larger arc of commercial connectivity where Indian goods would be transferred to Europe’s major markets and manufacturing centers. Linking India’s Arabian Sea coast to Greece’s Eastern Mediterranean coast along Eurasia’s southern rim, India’s ‘Arab-Med Corridor to Europe’ carries the potential to transform the connectivity architecture of Eurasia and India’s place in the global economic order. Once the transportation route is operational, Indian goods could arrive on the European mainland in as little as 10 days, cutting the travel time by approximately 40 per cent [8]. This corridor is highly conducive for value chain integration because of the existing synergies between India’s commercial ventures with its Arab Gulf partners and Israel, thus ensuring food security of the Emirates and other Middle Eastern countries.



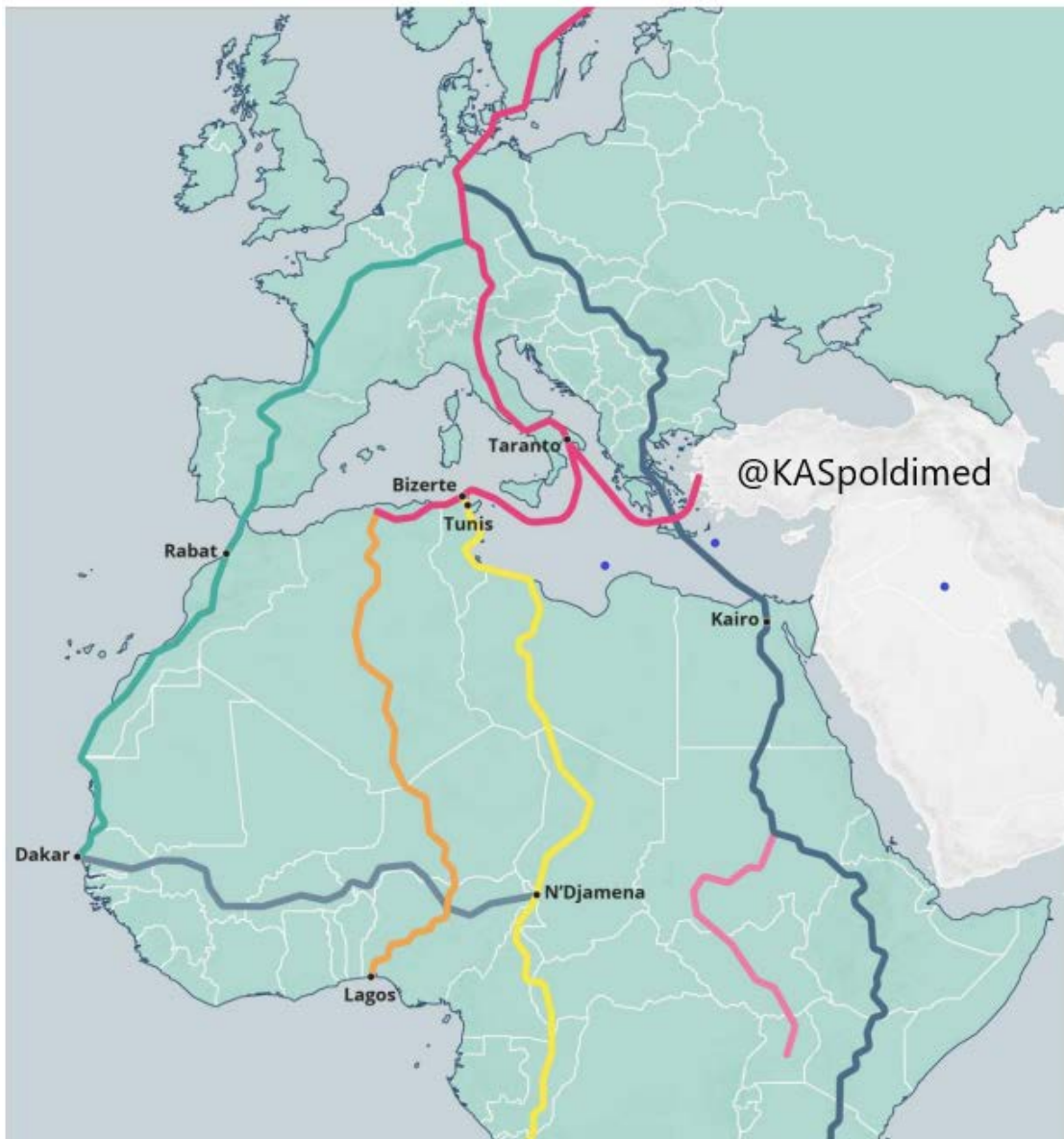
Map 1: India's Arab-Med corridor, Navdeep Suri, 'An India-Europe Trade Corridor? The Geoeconomics dimension of an emerging West Asia Quad', ORF (24.10.2021).

In addition, innovative technologies, including those related to the generation, storage and use of energy produced from natural gas, renewable sources and hydrogen, present a strategic imperative particularly for New Delhi and Athens for their shared threat perception of the deepening defense cooperation between Pakistan and Turkey, so as to advance value chain integration in the corridor. India and Israel innovative technologies and green energy extensive cooperation, demonstrates the enormous potential for multilateral partnerships among the five corridor countries [9].

The East Africa-Eastern Mediterranean-Europe corridor

Hellenic commercial cooperation with Egypt forms the core of its trans-Mediterranean connectivity. The relationship evolved rapidly since 2014 in face of shared concerns about Turkey's increasing tendency toward "coercive diplomacy" in EM. Cairo, Athens and Nicosia convened eight summits that fostered a deepening strategic cooperation in both security and economic matters, culminated by the August 2020 Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) Egypt-Greece maritime boundary agreement.

Egypt, thanks to its large offshore natural gas deposits and smart energy policies, has achieved natural gas self-efficiency in 2019 and has become a net energy exporter. Combined with massive investment in renewable energy power generation, Egypt is on the threshold of becoming both a natural gas and electricity export hub –a development which potentially could radically reconfigure the pattern of energy connectivity between Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Greece is continental Europe's landfall for the 2 GW capacity 'Euro-Africa electricity interconnector' (compared to Italy's one link to Algeria and Tunisia of only 0,6 GW), that will reach mainland Greece from Egypt via Cyprus and Crete. Hellenic Republic will thus shortly form integral part of Egypt's energy connectivity network. Mainland Greece will equally receive another 2-GW from the 'Euro-Asia Interconnector' grid coming from Israel through Cyprus. These European Commission founded projects, along with Greece's own advances in renewable energy power production, and Egypt-Greece direct electric cable connection project, will foster Athens brighter future in the energy geopolitics of South East Europe.



Map 2: Europe to East Africa trans-Mediterranean connectivity corridor, Michael Tanchum, 'Europe-Mediterranean-Africa Commercial Connectivity: Geopolitical Opportunities and Challenges', Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Med Dialogue Series No. 31, (November 2020): 2

Egypt and Greece are also working on projects of commercial port connectivity, combined with rail connectivity projects from East Africa to Egypt, and COSCO's freight rail service from Piraeus through the Balkans to major markets and manufacturing centers in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, and Poland. Provided that these projects materialize, Greece could be the nexus of a multi-modal East Africa to

Eastern/Central Europe corridor via the Eastern Mediterranean. Of course, in condition that Athens anchors its position in manufacturing value chains so that to become not just a transit state but a trans-Mediterranean power.

Furthermore, Egypt is constructing a high-speed railway line from its Red Sea port of Sokhna to Alexandria, thus accelerating the East Africa-Eastern Mediterranean corridor. Cairo also concluded a new transportation connectivity agreement with Sudan that incorporates rail connections, thus forging a north-south East Africa rail corridor with the White Nile countries' growing economies. With Greece's major Levantine and Arab Gulf partners involved in Sudan's economic development, Athens' increasingly important trans-Mediterranean role would be well served by cementing its position in the eastern Euro-Africa corridor through investments and the opening of production sites in Sudan, perhaps as joint ventures with Egypt, Israel, or its Arab partners. As Greece evolves its green energy and innovation economy, it would behoove Athens to leverage its new industries by strategically investing in production sites in the emerging trans-Mediterranean corridors, partnering with Egypt and other actors in the Euro-Africa or Euro-Middle East corridors to create joint facilities for electric vehicle manufacturing and manufacturing in other green economy sectors [10].

Greece as a multi-dimensional launching pad for trans-regional security purposes

The EM sits at the geographic and geostrategic nexus of Europe, Africa and the Middle East. "To the north, Aegean Sea serves as a gateway to and from southeastern Europe and the Black Sea littoral, including the Caucasus. The region's eastern seaboard is part of the Middle

East's geographic core which extends to Iran and the energy-rich shores of the Persian Gulf. Via the Suez Canal, the Eastern Mediterranean also interlinks with the Red Sea and, through it, other strategically vital chokepoints at Bab el Mandeb, the entrance to the Persian Gulf at Hormuz; and across the Indian Ocean to the subcontinent, Malacca, and the Pacific. To the south, the region connects to the Sahel and Horn of Africa through Libya and Egypt. And the straits of Sicily and Gibraltar provide transit lanes ultimately reaching all the way to northern Europe and the US. This 'sea between lands' has become a crucial maritime corridor for expansionist forces – including Turkey, Russia, China, and Islamist Jihadists seeking to exert power from one of the surrounding regions to the next" [11].

Within the context of this wide area new geopolitical configurations, Athens has achieved the signing of two important defense agreements: the one with France which substantially reinforces the Hellenic Navy with a FDI type frigates sale, and includes a mutual defense assistance clause in case of third party -including NATO member state- assault (Paris, 28.09.2021). The other with USA, extends by five years the two parties mutual defense cooperation agreement to major strategic value areas for both countries (Washington, 14.10.2021). These agreements reflect the new Aegean Sea and wider Eastern Mediterranean strategic data, where Washington is engaged to re-envision the EM as a strategic asset and a multi-theater power projection platform, from which smaller US forces can effectively and efficiently address threats not just in the immediate vicinity but in surrounding areas as well.

The new US-Greece defense pact reveals Washington's desire to maintain regional supervision, and sends to Turkey an indirect deterrence message, as opposed to the France-Greece pact that

operates as a direct deterrence tool and a real Western defense and security paradigm shift. Eastern Mediterranean energy resources bring France closer to Greece and the Republic of Cyprus in order to contain Turkey's expansionism. In fact, the EastMed pipeline project seems to be becoming in the medium term utilized as a tool to contain Turkey's 'Blue Homeland' revisionist doctrine. This would assess the effectiveness of the France-Greece defense pact.

U.S. most evidently support France to pursue a more proactive role in the Eastern Mediterranean through the Franco-Greek deal. As the latter highlight Paris interest to the area as France's strategic depth bridge between France and Africa, one could assess a high value complementarity between the France-Greece and US-Greece defense pacts. This characteristic was evidenced in Washington's Athens Ambassador Jeffrey Pyatt record briefing following the 3rd US-Greece strategic dialogue procedure (18.10.2021). The ambassador stipulated Greek foreign policy changing geometry. Making reference to the two countries' deliberations "which really covered the whole world — from Asia and the Indo-Pacific and U.S. and Greek strategy there to North Africa, of course the Eastern Mediterranean, the Western Balkans", he mentioned that Greek foreign policy "...is no longer constrained by a decade of economic crisis and is no longer focused just on one neighbor, but rather is thinking broadly about how to advance our shared interests in stability, in democracy, in rule of law across a broad swath of territory that goes all the way from the Western Balkans and the Black Sea down across the Eastern Mediterranean into North Africa, across through the Gulf and as far as the Indian Ocean" (<https://gr.usembassy.gov/ambassador-pyatts-on-the-record-briefing-with-greek-journalists-following-the-3rd-u-s-greece-strategic-dialogue/>).

In light of French President Macron's intensive effort to achieve EU's strategic autonomy within a united trans-Atlantic cooperation scheme, one could configure the evolution of the France-Greece defense pact as a nucleus of EU member states defense policy integration. Regarding the defense pact per se, there was a tolerance if not acceptance on the part of the US, both because they would like to gild the pill in France for what happened with the AUKUS agreement, and because Washington is currently in a state of distancing -not to mention relative escape- from the area. And US certainly would not want the gap left by their distancing to be covered by forces such as Russia and China, possibly cooperating with Turkey. Washington prefers to fill its gap with a network of allies and alliances that could include France, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and so on. In other words, countries close to the USA.

What United States are really opting for is the re-definition of the West, in other words re-drawing the western alliance around the US by creating an old allies to new allies union system; in essence, a unifying effort to bind together Atlantic alliance system (NATO) with US allies in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, a few days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the United States published its new Indo-Pacific strategy (11.02.2022), declaring "building bridges between the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic" as one of its goals [11]. Thereby the idea of aligning the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic into a single geopolitical theater gained significant currency in the wake of Russia's threats against Ukraine. Subsequently, leaders and government officials from the US, United Kingdom, European Union, Japan and Australia began asserting that security in the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic are indivisible. The idea is to combine the economic, political and military resources of partner countries to forge a collective security system spanning the two geopolitical theaters. One of the major reasons for the ongoing push

towards merging them is the treat perception from the deepening geostrategic cooperation between Russia and China. Presumably, such a coalition of like-minded powers is expected to lead to greater burden sharing between Washington and the partner countries as America will be hard-pressed to deal with China and Russia single-handedly [12].

In that sense, we are witnessing regionalism tentatives which aim to cover-up regional power vacuums. According to a 2020 US Institute of Peace report, "the Horn of Africa is now an integral part of, and in fact the link among, the security systems of the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific and the Mediterranean... As in the eastern Mediterranean, the export of Middle Eastern rivalries into the Horn –the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt contesting Turkey and Qatar for dominance- is fueling instability and insecurity..." [13].

The US sponsored relations normalization agreements ("Abraham Accords") between Israel and two Gulf states, UAE and Bahrain (2020) - all three preoccupied with Islamist movements rise and Turkey/Iran expansionist foreign policy-, have encouraged the emergence of an India, Israel and the United Arab Emirates geostrategic alliance. Turkey's support to Pakistan as security partner and arms supplier, urged India looking to the Eastern Mediterranean and Gulf to counter Turkish influence through cooperation with Ankara's main opponents, Greece and the UAE.

Israel alignment with UAE and India to counter Islamist movements and powers, Turkey-led Muslim order and defending state sovereignty, may evolve into establishing an Indo-Abrahamic strategic dialogue, particularly as Saudi Arabia seems to consider this grouping as a strategic opportunity. Greece has asked for a trilateral India and UAE

dialogue, which could include Israel given Athens strategic relation to Tel Aviv (July 2021). US named this dialogue “I2U2” (I2 stands for Israel, India, and U2 for United States, UAE). This scheme will focus on expanding economic and political cooperation in the Middle East and West Asia, including through trade, combating climate change, energy cooperation, and coordination. This “Third Corridor” to Europe was concretized in 2017 by UAE, when Abu Dhabi signed maritime transportation and logistics agreements in cargo transport and warehouses with Israel. Reasonably, an Indo-Abrahamic strategic grouping could provide the US a gap covering solution, due to Washington’s resolve into distancing from the Middle East, and connecting this grouping with the emerging US Indo-Pacific strategy.

Presumably, one could configure France assuming responsibility for an Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East-North Africa regional security “sub-contract”, due to US relative distancing from the area. Practically speaking, Washington would acquiesce that EU strategically focuses on the Mediterranean and MENA region, eventually leading even to the establishment of a MENA region security council. From that point of view, ‘Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum’ international organization (EMGF) recent involvement on regional security issues, could pave the way for the ‘birth’ of an “effective multilateralism” regionalism scheme, within the general framework of a reconfiguration of Europe’s security architecture in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion to Ukraine.

Conclusion

Greece, particularly after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and her pro-West positioning, emerges as a receptacle, producer and re-distributor of security, capable of co-shaping regional developments through new alliances and a credible military tool. The Hellenic

Republic in other words, by choosing to become the hub of European and American interests in a vast region from East Europe to the Horn of Africa and from the Levante to India, embraces the role of energy, strategic and economic interface between Europe and the Indian Ocean.-

Footnotes

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- [8] Ibid: 26

[9] Michael Tanchum, 'Greece's rise as a trans-Mediterranean power: Greece's Eastern Mediterranean strategic shift to Europe-to-Africa and Europe-to-Middle East connectivity': 3, 4

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