

THE EAST MEDITERRANEAN GAS FORUM: CONVERGENCE OF REGIONAL AND ENERGY SECURITY CONCERNS

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Introduction:

Thomas Malthus, a 19th century British thinker had aptly stressed on the power of mankind in creating conditions for their subsistence on earth (Belyi 2015). This can be contextualised in the aspirations of the Eastern Mediterranean states in fuelling their economies owing to natural gas discoveries in the region. The natural gas bonanza had hit the Eastern Mediterranean region in the 2000's beginning with the offshore Gaza Marine field (Palestine) Leviathan and Tamar fields (Israel), Aphrodite field (Cyprus) and Zohr gas field (Egypt).

This became a watershed moment for the regional economies who were seeking to improve their economic prospects. Given the increasing demand for natural gas and renewable energy coupled with the intense competition from established players in the international energy markets, the regional economies felt it prudent to pool their resources and establish a regional organization to cater to their common interests. As a result, the energy ministers from Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian National Authority decided to conceive the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in January 2019 (Winter and Gallia 2020).

These convergences have a bearing on Egypt's rising energy fundamentals in the region given its strategic location in connecting Europe, West Asia and North Africa to a regional sub-system of energy security

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(Tziampiris 2019). Thus, the regional forum has enhanced the geopolitical standing of the Eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea as a 'region' (Stivachtis 2019).

However, such developments have threatened Turkey's interests in the region especially on energy security. Hence, Turkey has sought the need to assert itself in the regional disputes which have been perceived as regional security challenge by specific members of the EMGF. The energy-related interactions inevitably deepen their securitization or desecuritization relations in the political and potentially the military sectors (Adamides and Odysseas 2015). In the light of Turkey's recent manoeuvres, it therefore becomes imperative to understand the convergences that have taken place in the context of both energy and regional security within the fold of the EMGF.

As energy insecurity remains an imminent characteristic of energy security, it can simultaneously influence the securitization of non-energy referent objects in other sectors (Adamides and Odysseas 2015). This leads one to examine the geopolitical underpinnings behind the formation of the EMGF which by and large has affected the region as a whole. Egypt, the region's star player has always played a fundamental role in harbouring relations based on energy and regional security and hence its relations with Greece, Cyprus, Israel, France, Italy and the EU needs examination in the wake of the establishment of the EMGF. The EMGF has been kept as the central pillar in understanding the international political economy behind the energy and regional security convergences by the above-mentioned member states. The objective behind undertaking this study has been to point out the inadequacies in establishing the EMGF which has inevitably shaped the geopolitics of the region.

Evolution of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum

The leaders from Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian National Authority came together in 'signing a charter establishing the intergovernmental' East Mediterranean Gas Forum in September 2020 (Reuters, September 22, 2020). Headquartered in Cairo, the forum became an arena to extend energy cooperation between the member states to establish a regional gas market. With French and Italian companies' interests invested in the offshore fields of the Eastern Mediterranean region (Leigh and Charlotte 2012; Lerman 2019), their inclusion into the forum's (Aydintasbas et al. 2020) membership was imperative. It is also important to note that the forum was cemented against the backdrop of energy cooperation

between Egypt and Israel as well as Egypt and Israel's trilateral summits with the European Union (EU) members (Greece, Cyprus) respectively (Al Jazeera, January 15, 2020; Embassy of Greece in Israel, December 21, 2018; Press and Information Service, Cyprus, October 09, 2019).

The Madrid conference (1991) and Barcelona process (1995) were some EU-led efforts which remained unsuccessful in culminating economic cooperation between the Mediterranean economies (Soliman 2011). The discoveries of natural gas in the offshore fields of Gaza (Palestine) (OQ, n.d.), Leviathan and Tamar (Israel) Aphrodite (Cyprus) and Zohr (Egypt) were game changers (Ellinas 2019) that signalled economic cooperation in the region. In the light of such developments, Israel and Egypt sought to extend their existing security cooperation in the Northern Sinai region and Gaza strip to the arena of energy as well by settling an international arbitration dispute (2012) between them (The Jerusalem Post, June 28, 2019; The Times of Israel, June 17, 2019).

As a result, Israel started exporting natural gas to Egypt with a two-fold strategy: a) to secure a regional market by utilizing the existing pipeline infrastructure between them b) to utilize Egypt's two LNG processing facilities for re-export to Europe until the construction of the East Med Gas (EMG) pipeline (Reuters, January 15, 2020). The EMG pipeline worth 6 billion Euros is expected to be completed by 2025 (Greek City Times, July 18, 2020). Destined to reach Europe from the Israeli coast, the decision to construct the pipeline was green lit by Cyprus, Greece, and Israel at their sixth trilateral summit (March 2019) alongside the decision to construct the Euro-Asia Interconnector, an undersea electricity grid for European markets (EuroAsia Interconnector, March 27, 2020).

Around the same time, Greece, and Cyprus' yearning to engage with Egypt also surged due to Egypt's biggest gas discoveries in 2015 and its overall regional standing as a 'natural gas exporter' (State Information Service, May 19, 2020). The resulting trilateral summits between Cyprus, Egypt and Greece extended over cooperation in the exploration of their offshore gas fields (Press and Information Service, Cyprus, October 09, 2019) to building the Euro-Africa Interconnector, another undersea electricity cable to Europe to boost energy exports (EuroAfrica interconnector, October 11, 2019).

Also, Jordan's membership into the forum stems from its energy relations with Egypt via the Arab gas pipeline (AFESD, n.d.). Notably, the inclusion of the Palestinian National Authority as a member of the EMGF is pivotal as it is the first regional organization whereby Israel and the Palestinian National Authority will be sharing screen space together despite the ban imposed by Israel on the exploration rights granted by the Palestinian

National Authority in 1999 on Gaza's offshore fields (Henderson 2014).

Nevertheless, the exclusion of Libya, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey from the forum's membership throws light on the perspective of the forum's existing members to exclude unfriendly or politically unstable countries. Thus, the pretext of organizing a budding natural gas industry in the name of energy security has cast a shadow on the prospects of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean region known for its historically infamous conflicts (Litsas 2018). This has warranted the need to examine the dimensions of energy security which became instrumental behind rallying the formation of such a regional organisation.

Dimensions of energy security underpinning the EMGF

Energy security refers to the ability of states to maintain uninterrupted energy supply that is relative to demand at affordable and relatively stable prices without sudden and significant price increases (Adamides and Odysseas 2015). As energy security can be examined in multiple dimensions namely political, military, economic, technical, and academic theories, the study has chosen to focus on the below-mentioned dimensions whereby the above-mentioned dimensions can be seen to be developing a convergence at various points in time.

Egypt's vibrant energy apparatuses

In command economies like Egypt for instance, institutions have played a crucial role in shaping energy resources and markets (Belyi 2015). The Egyptian government's modernization strategy (International Trade Administration 2020) in terms of production performance, refining, distribution, enterprise resource planning, and skilling of human resources (Cingoli 2016) have outlined its role in promoting its energy resources and markets. International Relations and security studies have contributed to the development of energy security theories whereby energy dependence remains a major security concern especially from a classical realist perspective due to the absence of an overarching authority in terms of global energy governance (Belyi 2015). Hence, Susan Strange, a prominent scholar in International Political Economy (IPE) has outlined four primary structures in IPE viz knowledge, production, finance, and security structures (Belyi 2015). Of the four primary structures, the security structure caters mostly to the energy

security dimension which includes self-sufficiency policies, interaction with other states, cooperation, and conflicts (Belyi 2015).

The elasticity in energy markets is due to the inter-fuel competition which has increased in relation to power generation (Belyi 2015). This puts Egypt's natural gas discoveries in Zohr (30 trillion cubic feet), Nooros (32 million cubic meters per day) and East Delta (350 million cubic meters per day) along with a mix of renewables, coal-fired plants and natural gas imports from Israel (International Trade Administration 2020) in the spotlight of the changing dynamics of the international energy markets. Besides, Egypt's administration over the Suez Canal, Suez-Mediterranean (SUMED) pipeline and LNG infrastructures at Idku and Damietta (Alterman, Conley, and Malka 2018) have proved complementary in harnessing Egypt's domestic energy production. Given the diverse range of energy production and distribution and based on the data provided by the Fitch Solutions Egypt Power Report, 2020 (Enterprise, March 11, 2020) attempts at achieving self-sufficiency in the generation of cleaner sources of electricity have become the chief goal of the Egyptian government. This had led the Standard Chartered Bank to predict in 2019 that 'Egypt would occupy the seventh position amongst the top ten economies in the next ten years' (Enterprise, March 11, 2020).

As the concept of sovereignty is pivotal to the dimension of energy security under IPE's security structure, Egypt's credibility in electricity exports to Jordan and Libya (Galal 2019) shored up Arab and European investments into Egypt's electricity generation. Noteworthy among them include the interconnection project (2013) with Saudi Arabia (Mahmoud 2020), 2000-megawatt Euro Africa Interconnector project to Europe (EuroAfrica Interconnector, April 28, 2020), wind farms such as West Bakr, Ras Ghareb, Gabal al-Zeit (boasting of 300 wind turbines), solar projects in West Nile Delta, Zafarana, Benban (Enterprise, 11 March, 2020) and the Siemens power plants construction (2018) that had produced a surplus of 20,000 megawatts (Galal 2019). Such developments have inevitably fuelled Egypt's desire in becoming a regional energy hub (State Information Service, May 19, 2020) by engaging in energy diplomacy with its regions nearby viz. Europe, West Asia, and Africa (Pedersen 2014).

As bidding for potential buyers in Africa continues, Egypt has decisively aimed at increasing its 'share of renewable energy to 20% in 2022' (Egypt Today, May 11, 2020) which attunes with Egypt's 'Vision 2030' that envisages sustainable development policies as regards energy security is concerned (Arab Republic of Egypt, June 19, 2020). Such positive developments for Egypt have led to improved relations with the EU evident during the 'first EU-League of Arab States Summit' (Egypt Today, February 24, 2019), trilateral

summits as well as multilateral engagements in establishing the EMGF enhancing Egypt's regional power apparatus. In particular, this has posed challenges for Turkey for whom energy security is both an economic as well as a security issue (Sotiriou 2020). Hence, it is pivotal to understand Turkey's role in the region of North Africa because of its involvement in the conflict of Libya which has coincided with the formation of the EMGF.

Turkey's role in the conflict in Libya

Libya which had been a bountiful Petro-state under the benevolent dictatorship of Muammar Qadhafi descended into chaos due to the intervention of NATO post the Arab Spring (2011). The divergences in power-sharing arrangements consequently led to the formation of two divisional governments. The Western division based in Tripoli is globally recognized as the Government of National Accord (GNA) while the Eastern division based in Tobruk is led by the Libyan National Army (LNA) under General Khalifa Haftar (Eljarh 2020). The Eastern division largely supported by Egypt, France, Russia and the UAE had launched an offensive against the Western division in April 2019 (ABC NEWS, June 07, 2020). The strategic gains made by the Eastern division came under threat when Turkey decided to join forces with the Western division in late 2019 (Lindenstrauss 2019). Turkey's trajectory towards aligning with troubled territories and supporting their national interests has been evident through its interventions in establishing the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC; 1974) recognised only by Turkey and in Syria (2016) to block the Kurd ethnic groups from whisking away power from the Assad government. However, Turkey's entry into the region of North Africa were largely due to fears at having to miss an opportunity in exploring the prospects of energy resources given the recent discoveries of natural gas in the region (Sotiriou 2020).

Turkey's patience started to wear with increasing importance being given to maritime delimitation agreements by its adversaries which restricted its ability to explore for energy resources that were closer to its territorial waters. Examples include the 'maritime delimitation agreements between Greece and Egypt' (2020) (The New York Times, August 27, 2020), Cyprus and Egypt (2003), Cyprus and Israel (2010) and between Cyprus and Lebanon (2007) all of which remain unrecognised by Turkey (Stocker 2012). These agreements while triggering the race to establish their respective Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) also have their bearings on the contentious issues that some of Turkey's neighbours have against it. Significant among them include the political legitimacy regarding TRNC with Cyprus and Greece,

Mavi Marmara incident with Israel and the non-recognition to Egypt's coup by the Abdel Fatah El-Sisi government post the Arab spring (Prontera and Mariusz 2017; Greek City Times, August 13, 2020). Such ruptured ties with Turkey resulted in the thawing of relations between the Eastern Mediterranean neighbours namely Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt and later on France and Italy owing to their oil companies. The trilateral, bilateral and multilateral (through the establishment of EMGF) mechanisms in energy cooperation thereby attempted to create conditions that would scar Turkey's credentials both as an energy gateway as well as a regional power. Hence, it became imperative for Turkey to stall the progress of the cooperative summits by nipping its problems in the bud.

In a bid to legitimize Turkey's claims to the EEZs, Turkey's maritime delimitation agreements with Libya's GNA (2019) and the TRNC (2011) (Pinko 2020; Forbes, February 07, 2020) resulted in the overlapping of its EEZs with that of Greece and Cyprus. Also, Turkey's military support to the Western division in Libya must be understood in the light of its need to securitize its claim in the regional competition pertaining to EEZs as well as to explore options in diversifying its energy security from Libya's share of reserves (Fouad 2019). By killing two birds with one stone, Turkey was thus able to sting the prospects of construction of the EMG pipeline from the Israeli coast while altering the power dynamics of the Western division through its military support in the Libyan conflict, a theatre predominantly controlled by the traditional players viz. Egypt, France and the UAE (Aydintasbas et al. 2020).

Turkey's strategies have its bearings on its major energy dependence from Russia which Turkey had attempted to diversify as per the strategic plan (2015-19) (Bechev 2020) by looking for prospective hydrocarbons in the Black as well as the Mediterranean Sea. With major 'discoveries of natural gas in the Black Sea' (Al Jazeera, August 27, 2020), 'Turkey's Annual Presidential Programme (2020)' had vouched to look for hydrocarbons in the contested EEZs of Greece and Cyprus (Daily Sabah, May 29, 2020). This has sparked alarm among Turkey's adversaries fuelling the formation of a 'five-nation alliance consisting of Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, UAE, and France' (The Associated Press, May 13, 2020). Hence, in the wake of Turkey's increasing assertiveness, convergences along regional and energy security lines became the final push towards the formation of the EMGF (S&P Global Platts, January 17, 2020).

Convergence of regional and energy security concerns

The securitization of a conflict helps partially in understanding the different perspectives on interdependence in international energy relations (Belyi 2015). Hence, by dissecting the term ‘securitization’ as per Robert Keohane’s positive and negative interdependence it can help one to discern the reasoning behind the formation of the EMGF. To garner a better understanding of the problem, the paper intends to focus upon Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, France, Italy, and the EU to study the dynamics behind the unfolding of positive and negative interdependencies in the context of energy security goals amid regional security concerns. Beginning with ‘positive interdependence’ it represents a situation whereby states are willing to depend on each other to create a situation of deeper governance (Belyi 2015) which has been noticed in the widespread cooperation between Egypt, Greece, Cyprus and Israel in forming the EMGF to counter the regional security challenges posed by Turkey (Wolfrum 2020).

Egypt who had pioneered the entire process of forming an energy-based regional forum has a history of harbouring energy relations with its neighbours especially Libya. This can be traced back to Egypt’s energy sector that had grown immensely during the reign of Muammar Qadhafi in Libya whose ardent investments (Arafa and Mieczyslaw 2017) led Egypt to enjoy plentiful energy exports until the Arab Spring (Piera 2020). However, with the ongoing civil war in Libya, Egypt’s porous border with the country remains a perennial security threat owing to Egypt’s fears that it might have a potential spill-over of terrorist activity into Western Egypt (Arafa and Mieczyslaw 2017). With Egypt battling terrorist activities in the Northern Sinai region (Arafa and Mieczyslaw 2017) while experiencing an outpour of investments into its energy sector, managing Libya’s conflict remains one of Egypt’s primary foreign policy goals (State Information Service, Egypt May 19, 2020).

This explains Egypt’s diplomatic support to the LNA which is pivotal as the Eastern division in Libya controls most of the energy reserves which if disrupted can create further chaos (Fouad 2019). Thus, Egypt’s call for ceasefire (ABC NEWS, June 07, 2020) and active participation in the Berlin process (Xinhua, January 10, 2020), and Cairo Declaration (State Information Service, May 19, 2020) enunciates Egypt’s foreign policy to engage in Libya’s state-building exercises to ensure peace and stability (Mühlberger 2016) in the region of North Africa. Egypt’s actions in the wake of Turkey’s entry into the conflict by calling for a ‘military intervention in Libya’ (Egypt Today, January 12, 2020) and drum rolling support for the five-nation alliance showcases attempts in cementing Egypt’s role in the conflict (Xinhua, January 10, 2020)

as a mediator and a prudent regional actor vis-à-vis Turkey in the region of North Africa.

Egypt's actions stem from its display of indispensability rendered during the UN held peace processes at Morocco (Arafa and Mieczyslaw 2017) due to its vibrant ties with the Eastern division of Libya. Thus, Egypt's susceptibility in being both a regional ally as well as a significant counterweight to balance Turkey has resulted in Egypt being chosen as the headquarters for the EMGF. This has been reflected in the enlargement of the stakes in the positive interdependencies by Israel, Greece and Cyprus with Egypt given the latter's amicability with the regional as well as non-regional powers viz. USA, EU, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (Eljarh 2020). This renders flocking around Egypt as a potential insurance cover against the regional security challenges posed by Turkey in their respective EEZs as well as in receiving the necessary impetus towards sustaining their energy security agendas through the medium of the EMGF.

Hence, for transit points Greece and Cyprus, the EMG pipeline remains a key in delivering their economic dispositions while seeking disengagement from Turkey. This is in fact due to their shared animosity for Turkey given the latter's military intervention into Cyprus (1974) resulting in the creation of contentious maritime borders with Turkey. Adding fuel to the animosity has been Turkey's desire for exploration operations in the EEZs of Greece and Cyprus (Aydintasbas et al. 2020) creating regional security challenges for both Greece and Cyprus. As Turkey remains a non-signatory to the UNCLOS, it does not recognize the right of islands in enjoying EEZs (Sotiriou 2020) which is the case with Greece and Cyprus possessing islands as part of their political boundaries. As Cyprus is an island country with an ethnic Greek population and the epicentre of the EMG pipeline, Nicosia's selection as the permanent Secretariat for the trilateral summits between Israel, Greece, and Cyprus and between Egypt, Greece and Cyprus throws light on its geostrategic importance (Pedi 2019) in terms of both energy as well as regional security in relation with Turkey. Hence, Greece and Cyprus have chosen to rally behind Egypt by extending cooperation through trilateral summits, maritime delimitation agreements (Lindenstrauss 2019) and the EMGF membership. The decision to join the five-nation alliance further cements their positive interdependencies with Egypt so as to insure their economic and national interests, case in point being the contested EEZs with Turkey.

Israel's choice in staying neutral by being absent from the five-nation alliance that includes Greece, Egypt and Cyprus in Libya's conflict explains Israel's geostrategy in appreciating Egypt's regional prowess in the region of North Africa (Lerman 2019) while ensuring its market for natural gas exports

to Egypt. Also, Israel's decision to cooperate on the EMG pipeline was purely economic in nature given its rapprochement with Greece and Cyprus that took place against the backdrop of degraded ties with Turkey due to the Mavi Marmara incident (Prontera and Mariusz 2017). This was due to Israel's newly found fundamentals in natural gas and electricity exports. But with Turkey's drilling operations in the disputed EEZ of Cyprus that is close to the Israeli gas fields, its perception of security threat from Turkey inevitably matched with that of Cyprus and Greece's perceptions. Thus, the trilateral summits between them signalled the need to create positive interdependencies in regional security as far as energy security was concerned (Embassy of Greece in Israel, December 21, 2018; Press and Information Service, Cyprus, October 09, 2019). As a result, Israel's membership to the EMGF and its engagement with Turkey's fraught neighbours points to the rising tide of negative interdependencies as far as energy relations with Turkey are concerned.

This correlation between the positive and the negative interdependencies in the region points to the fact that the stakeholders can be biased, manipulative or poorly informed, prompting one to reflect on the element of irrationality in their policy choices (Belyi 2015). On that note, the scholars have been right in noting the tensions between dependent states' need for security of supply and producing states' need for security of demand (Belyi 2015). In this regard, France and Italy's push towards steering the EU into the EMGF remains instrumental given their oil companies' presence in the region (Aydintasbas et al. 2020; Alterman, Conley, and Malka 2018).

The build-up to France and Italy's interest in the EMGF membership remains energy infrastructure investments in the EMGF's member states. Significant among them are Italy's involvement in the construction of the EMG pipeline (Energy Egypt, April 30, 2020), Eni (Piera 2020), Electricite de France, Engie (Energy Egypt, November 25, 2019; Energy Egypt, December 8, 2019) and Agence Française de Développement's investments (AFD, June 16, 2020) into Egypt's renewable energy infrastructure projects. Interestingly, Barry Buzan and Ole Waever have characterized Regional Security Complexes (RSCs) as having a flexible interstate relationship, whereby states can be a part of two or more RSCs, which may also overlap with each other geographically (Belyi 2015).

Thus, the driving force of RSCs is the enmity and amity relationships among the states within the complex rather than the balance of power resulting into regional security integration (Adamides and Odysseas 2015). Such flexibility of interstate relationships within two RSCs led to the development of positive interdependencies by France and Italy with fellow EU members Cyprus and Greece enabling them to jointly request the 'February

2020 sanctions against Turkey' due to the latter's pervasive activities in the Eastern Mediterranean waters and Libya (Council of the EU, February 27, 2020). Thus, given the widespread discontent harboured by the EMGF states against Turkey, it becomes pivotal to understand the trigger points behind the formulation of negative interdependencies in the region.

'Negative interdependence' represents a situation whereby states show unwillingness in being dependent on the other resulting in the emergence of energy security problems (Belyi 2015). This has been particularly witnessed in the case of harbouring energy-based ties with Turkey who seems isolated from the deepening positive interdependencies in the region. Be it Turkey's actions in negotiating a 'maritime boundary agreement with GNA' or its activities in the 'contested waters of Greece and Cyprus', they have been both 'denounced as invalid' under the international law by the Eastern division in Libya as well as the five-nation alliance (Eljarh 2020; Aydintasbas et al. 2020).

In the light of such developments, the EU's position as an observer in the EMGF (S&P Global Platts, January 17, 2020; Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, May 18, 2020) cannot escape due consideration. The EU had been sending representatives to the high-level working group meetings held under the EMGF (Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, May 20, 2020) which indicates the EU's primary energy security concerns emanating from its dependence on Russian energy supplies (Belyi 2015). With hydrocarbon discoveries so close to Europe viz. in North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean region, the EU has sought to create positive interdependencies in the region by seeking an alternative to Russian supplies that are currently being transported via Turkey (Turk Stream pipeline; Alterman, Conley, and Malka 2018).

Thus, the EU by rendering a negative interdependence with Russia and Turkey has sought to balance it through positive interdependencies through the medium of investments into Egypt's renewable energy segment and funding for the EMG pipeline. With Turkey's growing assertiveness in Libya and the contentious EEZs of EU members Greece and Cyprus, the EU has been forced to take a stand alongside the EMGF member states given their geo-strategic interests in the region. Barry Buzan in his book 'Peoples, States and Fear' had called for re-assessing the term 'securitization' which is a non-linear reaction to a threat (Belyi 2015). Building on Buzan's argument, the EU's actions have indeed taken a non-linear reaction by engaging in 'Medusa 9 joint military exercises' (November 2019; Greek City Times, November 5, 2019) and 'Operation Irini' to enforce an 'arms embargo on Libya' (April 2020; EEAS, April 1, 2020) to ensure both regional peace as well as energy diversification.

Hence, two results can be inferred from the above-mentioned dimensions of energy security underpinning the EMGF:

a) Energy cooperation has been needed with state actors that are willing to develop friendly relations both bilaterally as well as multilaterally. The maritime delimitation agreements, energy exploration and infrastructure arrangements have been clear pointers in this regard. Thus, the establishment of the EMGF remains pivotal in consolidating the member-states roles as energy players in the burgeoning energy fundamentals of the region.

b) The absence of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Libya from the EMGF membership indicates the wariness of the member states in taking risks with unfriendly or politically unstable countries. The non-members absence during inter-governmental negotiations was in fact due to the EMGF member states reluctance in including them during the trilateral and bilateral mechanisms. These mechanisms have in turn augmented the developing of negative interdependencies in the region thereby exacerbating the region's security challenges.

Thus, a close reading of the above-mentioned dimensions indicates that the EMGF state actors have by and large embraced the development of certain transnational norms that have been adapted within the EMGF's framework. However, they have necessarily become impediments in realizing the region's energy interests as a whole calling into question the long-term viability of the EMGF.

Issues and Concerns in the EMGF initiative

As 'multi-scale governance' gains traction in the field of energy markets and infrastructures, the adaptability of the various state and non-state actors to the various norms, rules and values of an economic activity plays a key role in defining the new role of sovereignty in IPE (Belyi 2015). As per the new institutional economics, a boundedly rational choice approach is applied in defining institutions which can be derived either from a social or an economic context (Raudla 2014). Thus, the major theme that spells from the objectives of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum has been energy security mired with the need to ensure regional security in the region (State Information Service, May 19, 2020). As transnational norms, rules and values can find acceptance in certain parts of the world or in certain expert communities and businesses (Belyi 2015), the development of the same when it comes to the EMGF appears skewed given the member states interests looming large over the non-member's interests. This has been explained in the below-mentioned

arenas.

Membership criteria

Ties related to energy infrastructure has played out significantly into establishing the membership criteria in the EMGF. Beginning with Egypt, the star player in the region, its possession of the Arab Gas Pipeline, SUMED pipeline as well as the two LNG infrastructures at Idku and Damietta (Stonaker 2010) have benefitted customers such as France and Jordan. This paved the candidature for all the three to become members of the EMGF. Palestine's 2016 Electricity agreement with Israel, its electricity imports from Egypt and prospects attached to the Gaza Marine gas field have found clearance as to Palestine's application for EMGF membership (OQ, n.d.). Greece's fundamentals in energy infrastructure had been recognised through the presence of Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), an extension of TANAP (Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline) passing through Turkey (Tagliapietra 2020). With EU looking at energy diversification from Turkey and given Israel and Cyprus' inability in possessing energy infrastructure, the EU by commissioning the EMG pipeline has sought to transport similar volumes as TAP (Eran 2019).

The decision to construct the EMG pipeline from the Israeli coast to Greece and onwards from Italy into Europe during the trilateral summits between Greece, Cyprus and Israel was the final straw in placing the state parties within the spectrum of the EMGF membership. These developments however come with a caveat when it comes to developing a regional gas market with Turkey, Libya, Syria and Lebanon. By ignoring Turkey's wealth of energy infrastructure projects such as TANAP, Turk stream, Blue stream including renewable energy (Bechev 2020; Livingston, 2018) or Libya's capacity in generating oil and gas that is sixty percent of its total GDP (The Economist, June 11, 2020) or the prospects of hydrocarbons in the waters of Syria and Lebanon (Reuters, December 17, 2019; Aydintasbas et al. 2020), their absence from the EMGF membership indicates the development of a politically-induced norm. The norm to disengage with political systems that are unfriendly or volatile in nature from an institutional economist point of view appears to be structuring the incentives of the member state in deciding the costs and benefits attached to the subscription of such a norm (Raudla 2014).

However, in terms of the IPE such a norm definitely draws down on the energy fundamentals of Turkey, Libya, Syria and Lebanon stopping short of conceiving the notion of a 'regional' gas market as underlined under the

objectives of the EMGF. In the light of such institutional weaknesses, the EMGF can take a leaf off the OPEC's mindfulness (OPEC, n.d.) when it comes to admission of members. The OPEC's playbook has been instrumental in housing key rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as the other big and small Petro-states despite their differing national interests (OPEC, n.d.). Thus, it will be a step in the right direction if the EMGF member states take heed to correct one of the institution's paramount deficiency.

Energy resource development

The politically-induced norm while admitting members to the forum has also been effectively applied when considering awardees for exploration contracts in the region's offshore fields. With Italy's 'Eni enjoying a 50% stake in the Bouri field of Libya' (S&P Global Platts, January 29, 2020, in 'Map: Libya's oil and gas infrastructure'), energy supplies to Italy have continued despite the challenges posed by the conflict in Libya (Villa 2016). As best-practice transfers remain a standard practice in the field of energy policy (Belyi 2015), Eni's prowess has led it to receive contracts in the offshore fields of Cyprus and Egypt. This has not deterred the other international companies such as Rosneft and Novatek (Russia), Total (France) and Delek (Israel) from participating and winning exploration contracts in the offshore fields of Egypt, Cyprus and Israel respectively. Such instances indicate the stark realities behind the formation of a value system based on energy and security partnerships.

France, Italy, Russia are active players in the conflict in Libya as well as in the offshore oil fields of the EMGF member states. Israel on the other hand due to its superior military systems has enlarged its support base with Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt (Lerman, 2019) in exchange for cooperation in exporting natural gas through a shared pipeline. As deterring Turkey remains core to the EMGF's interests French air and naval support to monitor Turkey's activities (Kohler 2020) and Israel's testing of sea-to-sea missiles (The Times of Israel, September 25, 2020) to warn Turkey bears witness to the allegiance by the EMGF members to safeguard the value-system of energy and security partnerships. Meanwhile, the adoption of this value-system remains absent from the exploration and production agreements of the non-member states viz. Libya's GNA to Italy (Eni) and Turkey, Lebanon to France (Total) (Middle East Eye, February 13, 2021) and Russia (Novatek) (NOVATEK, February 09, 2018), Syria to Russian oil companies (Mercury LLC and Velada LLC) (Reuters, December 17, 2019) and Turkey to its state-owned firms (Al Jazeera, August 27, 2020). Libya, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey's trust deficit in engaging with

other oil companies in the region stems from the relative absence of energy partnerships with EMGF member-states propelling them to favour the oil companies of their respective regional security providers in the development of their energy resources. Hence, the above-mentioned value-system is not conducive to all the members of the Eastern Mediterranean region thereby questioning the fundamentality of the EMGF as being a representative of the region as a whole.

UNCLOS norms

The norms laid down by the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea) has been sparking conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean region (Stocker 2012). The recent maritime delimitation agreements signed between Italy and Greece and between Cyprus, Egypt and Israel have been in accordance with the norms and principles laid down by the UNCLOS (Sotiriou 2020).

Although Israel is the only non-signatory to the UNCLOS, it has consistently vowed to respect the regional aspirations during the trilateral summits (Sotiriou 2020) as well as during the EMGF negotiations (Macaron 2019) which has been key towards including Israel within the fold of the EMGF. Moreover, with Greece's overtures to Libya to set up a commission on finalizing the maritime zones (Greek City Times, July 04, 2020), the development of a transnational rule as stated by Belyi is reflected in the maritime delimitation of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea in terms of development of energy resources.

However, there's a substantive deficiency in the creation of this norm due to the digression from the principle emancipated under Part XV of the UNCLOS. Part XV calls for resorting to alternative dispute resolution in order to resolve problems pertaining to the delimitation of maritime zones (Sotiriou 2020) which has not been the case with Greece, Cyprus or Egypt evident in their failure to defuse tensions with Turkey. As Turkey lost the opportunity in negotiating maritime delimitation agreements with Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt (Tsukerman, 2020), it chose to negotiate a maritime delimitation agreement with a fellow non-signatory state to the UNCLOS viz. Libya's GNA (Sotiriou 2020).

On the other hand, while Israel claims to respect the international law during maritime delineation of borders it dispute with Lebanon, an UNCLOS signatory remains unresolved (Prontera and Mariusz 2017). This highlights the limited bargaining power of countries like Lebanon or Libya vis-à-vis

Turkey indicative in their silence as regards the maritime delimitation efforts in the region are concerned throwing light on the lack of consensus to the UNCLOS norms in the region. Thus, the closing of doors for participation in the evolving regional gas market based on UNCLOS norms remains skewed. Consequently, the visible disruption to the EMGF member's plans in carving out a bargaining chip in geoeconomics of the region based on their energy fundamentals showcases an early warning. Hence, efforts should be made to build a consensus as to the delineation of maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea by drawing inspiration from customs, precedents, and other sources of international law (Hasan et al. 2019) other than the UNCLOS alone.

Thus, suitable sector-specific mechanisms should be employed by the forum's member states in initiating a dialogue with the other distressed economies in the region in order to enhance the effectiveness of the EMGF as a symbol of energy cooperation both in letter and spirit.

Conclusion

The establishment of the EMGF has been a step in the right direction especially in a region that remains known for its volatile conflicts. The EMGF while having moorings based on energy cooperation and regional security concerns also suffers from institutional weaknesses. This is in fact due to its infancy as an organization vis-à-vis the other regional organizations. As the EMGF's resilience remains to be tested, restructuring of the EMGF is warranted in order to put up a united front against stiff competition from the other major energy players. This can only be realized through mechanisms aimed at dimming the tensions in the region which in turn affects both the EMGF as well as the region's existing and upcoming investments. Regarding the conflict in Libya, a tug-of-war situation has been witnessed between the two fundamental powers in the region - Egypt and Turkey.

However, as possibilities of rapprochement remain open in the wake of withdrawal of the GCC blockade (Egypt was one of the supporters) against Qatar who has been Turkey's ardent supporter (Kabbani 2021), it is prudent enough to opine that Egypt and Turkey's geo-strategic importance as energy gateways should be utilized in harbouring bilateral as well as multilateral energy partnerships with the other regional states. For instance, the extension of the Arab Gas pipeline through Syria, Lebanon and onto Turkey (AFESD, n.d.) can unleash the energy fundamentals of these countries who are primarily not members of the EMGF.

Such scenarios can help build better relations among territories where the pipelines will be built as the incentives associated with pipeline politics remains a potential area of research in this region. Hence, tendencies at harbouring positive interdependencies coupled with the resolve of the member states to rectify the above-mentioned deficiencies can prove fundamental in letting the EMGF grow as a ray of hope for the region.

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ABSTRACT

The East Mediterranean Gas Forum, a nascent regional organisation stands at the crossroads of regional cooperation today. Formed in the wake of natural gas discoveries and the resultant bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, the organisation has been beset with positive and negative interdependencies in the region. These interdependencies highlight the energy and regional security concerns of the region's members. As convergences along energy and regional security lines unfold, the foundational structures of the forum have showcased cracks raising questions regarding its relevance. The study thus seeks to examine the dynamics of the international political economy behind the formation of the EMGF by analysing the convergence of energy and regional security concerns of the specific state actors in the region.

KEYWORDS

The East Mediterranean Gas Forum, Energy security, Regional security, Pipeline, EEZ.

Received on July 19th, 2022

Approved on December 19th, 2022