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Gas and Security. Strategic Realignments in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The geostrategic region of the Eastern Mediterranean reacquires a prominent role in the new Middle East order, marked by the geopolitical return of Iran and Russia's military assertiveness in Syria.

In such a context, natural gas discoveries in the Levant Basin amid Egypt (the Zohr field), the Republic of Cyprus (Aphrodite) and Israel (Leviathan and Tamar) are apparently game-changer factors: they can foster cooperative alliances able to limit regional entropy or ignite conflicts for resources, boosting counter-alliances driven by geopolitical interests.

Egypt, Israel, RoC (Republic of Cyprus) and Greece have been intensifying cooperative efforts with regard to the energy issue: the most recent Egypt-RoC-Greece meeting was held in Cairo on October 11th. The suggested "East Med" pipeline would transport natural gas from Israel and Cyprus to Greece (via the Crete isle), so exporting natural gas in Europe.

Egypt's energy choices and Turkey's foreign policy direction will shape major outcomes on this topic. The Zohr field (850 bcm) is the largest one in the Eastern Mediterranean. Domestic energy consumption has raised, but at the same time central authorities need more and more financial resources to maintain social stability. Because of different visions on the Syrian file, Saudi Aramco has just suspended (for one month) oil supplies to Egypt: in these uncertain times, Cairo's government will likely prioritize domestic energy demand on gas export.

Turkey's recent rapprochements with Israel and Russia are turning-points in such a fluid scenario. As a matter of fact, about 60% of Ankara's imported gas comes from Russia: therefore, this détente - together

with the revitalization of the Turkish Stream project - could partially reduce Turkish aspirations on the Eastern Mediterranean energy route. On the other hand, Turkey-Israel diplomatic normalization could indirectly undermine ongoing cooperative efforts in the region, especially before the political settlement of the Cyprus issue: RoC, Greece and Egypt all share complex relations with Ankara. Moreover, Israel could decide to export directly to Turkey, even though it would probably have to pass through the RoC's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), something improbable before a definite solution on Cyprus.

Looking at the Eastern Mediterranean region from a broader perspective, RoC-Greece-Israel can be potentially in terms of political correlation a security constellation able to balance Turkish initiatives. This could be true also in terms of naval capabilities; although this constellation needs further political consolidation, this potential balance could act as an additional element of sub-regional stability.

Prospects of common gas exploitation have now intensified trilateral relations and, with the implementation of the "East Med" pipeline, the energy factor can further develop them, contributing to overcome persistent zero-sum perspectives.

The European Union would have only to gain from the "East Med" project in terms of energy security, allowing European countries to reduce levels of gas dependence from Russia and Algeria, the latter being a reliable energy provider, although affected by the unknowns of the post-Boutleflika transition.