

Reconsidering 'EU Actorness' in Changing Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean Region

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ABSTRACT *The discovery of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean reshuffled the existing foreign policies, increased the region's geopolitical importance, and acted as a catalyst for the emergence of new geopolitical dynamics and political alignments. The European Union (EU) has been involved in the Eastern Mediterranean region due to foreign, security, and energy policy considerations. The hydrocarbon deposits have the potential to provide diversification of resources and act as a bridge for greater cooperation in the region. Instead, the explosive geopolitical context evokes insecurities and threat perceptions. This article aims to contextualize the EU's engagement in the Eastern Mediterranean region vis-à-vis the latest developments and political factors.*

Keywords: Eastern Mediterranean, Geopolitics, Hydrocarbons, EU Actorness, Soft Power

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Introduction

The discovery of natural gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean within the offshore territories of Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Cyprus reshaped the existing foreign policies and political alignments on both the international and regional levels. The new strategic equation in the Eastern Mediterranean started to develop in line with the domestic and regional dynamics. Regional actors such as Türkiye, Israel, Iran, Egypt, and Greece, together with the global powers, the U.S., Russia, the European Union (EU), and China, influence the present-day conditions and the reconfiguration of the future of the region. The geopolitical dynamics in the region have been evolving around the exploitation of regional energy sources, the creation of new strategic cooperation, rising competition, and tension over energy resources.¹ The long-term implications of these factors will determine the regional balance of power and the future place of the Eastern Mediterranean within a global context.

Like the broader Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean region has a challenging environment, surrounded by protracted conflicts, tension, and geographical instability that restrains its energy potential.² The geopolitical and energy concerns are generating many new challenges and opportunities for the local and global actors in the region. The impact of the new developments within the Eastern Mediterranean context has extended beyond the regional borders. They created unprecedented geopolitical consequences for the whole region, leading related states to develop new strategies and policies to extend their position, power, and influence. The global actors significantly impact the shifting dynamics of the Eastern Mediterranean. To a large extent, the presence of many players contributed to the complexity and tension. The region has been filled with warships, tankers, natural gas drilling, and various project proposals for subsea cables and pipelines.³

Against this background, this study evaluates the role of the EU in the shifting geopolitical order of the Eastern Mediterranean and questions whether the EU can extend its influence beyond its borders. The conceptual framework of the article is built on the EU's global role. In recent years, a renewed academic interest has arisen in the conceptual debates over the EU's global actorness. Over the past four decades, numerous academic studies tried to conceptualize and understand the nature of the EU in world affairs. Since its foundation, the EU has faced challenges to act as a united actor in global affairs due to the lack of consensus among the member states on a common EU foreign policy and the resulting inconsistency between the domestic and supranational levels.

Early academic literature on the EU's actorness focused on 'actor capability,' mainly referring to the structural characteristics and 'actor behavior,' which

indicated the features and performance. The subsequent academic studies developed more detailed and comprehensive categories for actor capacity, actor characteristics, and effectiveness of the EU's actions.⁴ Burgeoning academic attention began considering the context that frames and shapes the EU action for a comprehensive understanding of

the EU's global role. Newly emerging literature based on several case studies, such as the EU's policy toward Iran⁵ and Kosovo,⁶ the EU's involvement in Ukraine⁷ and Georgia,⁸ and the EU's actions in Mali,⁹ examine and shed light on the EU's growing role in international affairs. No academic study has examined the EU's impact on the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, the main goal of this study is to contextualize the EU's engagement in the Eastern Mediterranean region vis-à-vis the current geopolitical factors and the tensions over the sharing of hydrocarbon resources. In that context, this article focuses on how the EU is involved in the region and seeks to provide new insights into the literature on the bloc's international role. It aims to evaluate the presence and influence of the EU on regional dynamics and how this reflects on the EU's global role. The time frame of the research covers the past decade, starting from the discovery of natural gas resources in the late 2000s until now. The primary research questions are i) whether and how the EU influences regional dynamics and ii) whether it can facilitate cooperation and stability in the region. The study's main hypothesis suggests the potential of the EU's policy implementation through diplomatic, economic, and political instruments such as political dialogues, declarations, economic incentives, and the threat of sanctions in the Eastern Mediterranean. By this means, the EU may enhance its position, exert influence and promote cooperation and regional stability.

Many scholars have analyzed the methodological challenges in measuring the EU's role in international affairs. Previous studies have based their criteria for evaluating the EU's global actorness on the concept of normative power, constructivist approach, geopolitical context, legal framework, use of sanctions, and state-building. Identifying the difficulties encountered by the scholars, Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler propose a useful approach to measuring the actorness of the EU. To assess whether and how the EU impacts the shifting geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean, this study adopts the conceptualization of Bretherton and Vogler outlined as the capacity to utilize policy instruments, namely diplomacy, negotiation, and economic tools.¹⁰ In this direction, the research process follows qualitative empirical research based on textual analysis. The data is collected from public declarations, bilateral and regional treaties/agreements, press conferences, European Commission reports

The geopolitical and energy concerns are generating many new challenges and opportunities for the local and global actors in the East Mediterranean region

The EU's international role and capacity to answer new security challenges again came to the forefront in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks

and documents, the European Council conclusions, and newspaper articles. The data analysis was based on the indicators representing the EU's position in the region. In the following sections of the article, a conceptual framework on the EU's role in international politics, an overview of the current regional developments, and the EU's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean region is provided; in addition, in what ways the EU can facilitate cooperation and stability in the fragile context of the Eastern Mediterranean are explored.

Conceptualizing the EU's Role in Global Politics

The EU's role in international affairs has long been the subject of many academic papers, policy briefs, and commentaries. The state-centric and traditional international relations theories underestimate the EU's role in world politics. The rationalist approach counts the EU's role based on its global impact. Institutionalism emphasizes the significance of institutions in international relations and their ability to influence state behavior. Other approaches refer to the EU's role in global affairs to promote regional cooperation, liberal values, human rights, democracy, conflict prevention, and crisis management.¹¹ The unique character of the EU as a hybrid entity, which is regarded as neither an intergovernmental organization nor a state but operates globally in different policy areas, problematized the conceptualizations of the scholars.

François Duchêne's civilian power description was one of the initial attempts to conceptualize Europe's role in the world.¹² The civilian power notion focused on the possibility of an actor being a power without military means. As introduced later by Joseph S. Nye, the concept of soft power works through economic incentives and diplomatic persuasion.¹³ This refers to persuading or attracting other actors to change their preferences and behaviors without coercion or the fear of coercive power. During the Cold War, the EC emphasized particularly the civilian aspect of its role in the international scene, which also aimed at contributing to international conflict resolution. After the failure of the European Defense Policy (EDP), the debates and questions around the conception of the soft power of the European Community (EC) started, specifically with regard to its capacity to become a global player. In the late 1970s, Gunnar Sjöstedt's pioneering book *The External Role of the European Community* has further taken the theoretical and conceptual approaches to the EU actorness.¹⁴ Sjöstedt tried to develop a criterion to measure the extent the organization could constitute an actor in the international system. By defining

the necessary conditions and elements of being an actor, Sjöstedt introduced the concepts of actor capacity and autonomy, which paved the way for later work on the EU's global role.

In the 1980s, the debate on the EC's role in world affairs re-emerged when the organization began to implement conditionality in its foreign relations and promoted norms in exchange for assistance and trade preferences with third states.¹⁵ This led to academic discussions on the organization's normative power that asserts a role "in the international arena through the exportation of its norms and values."¹⁶ A new turn in the EC's role or presence in global politics started after the initiation of both the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in 1992 and the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) in 1999. Concurrently, these instigated renewed discourses on the formulations of the civilian and normative character of the union. In this context, Hans Maull further developed the idea of civilian power and redefined the EU's influence in the global arena as a civilian power based on the prospects of membership and association, economic and financial incentives, sanctions, diplomatic skills, conflict management capacity in conflict prevention and peace-building tasks.¹⁷ Similarly, Mario Telò argued that a political unit can be regarded as a civilian power if it can obtain "international peaceful objectives using other methods."¹⁸

The end of the Cold War led to seismic shifts in the international system, and the EU's civilian power status was challenged in the post-Cold War era. The outbreak of armed conflict during the dissolution of Socialist Yugoslavia and political instability in Eastern Europe envisaged a greater role for the EU as a regional security actor. The inability of the EU and its member states to respond to conflicts in the Balkans revealed the lacking military capabilities for conflict prevention, crisis management, or peacekeeping.¹⁹ Since then, the EU has tried to develop its military capacity for crisis management and peacekeeping. The EU's international role and capacity to answer new security challenges again came to the forefront in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Developing appropriate responses to the new security challenges acknowledged by the *European Security Strategy* meant that Europe should be ready to share in the responsibility for global security and building a better world. In response, the EU had to depart from its civilian power role and was obliged to create the capabilities for conflict prevention, crisis management, and peacekeeping. The *European Security Strategy 2008* and *European Global Strategy 2016* endorsed the development of adequate instruments and integrated approaches to conflict and crisis management and the promotion of regional approaches to conflict resolution.

The dominant approach in the EU was to assume more responsibility and confront new challenges in the post-Cold War context. Many academic studies

Egyptian Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources Tarek el-Molla (C), Israeli Minister of Energy Karine el-Harrar (R) and EU Commissioner for Energy Kadri Simson (L) sign an agreement in Cairo, Egypt on June 15, 2022. Egypt Ministry of Petroleum / AA



questioned the EU's capacities as an international actor within this context. Among the most well-known, the notion of the capability-expectations gap of Christopher Hill assesses the challenges of the EU as an international actor based on the divergence between the envisaged roles for the EU and its ability to agree, its resources and the instruments at hand vis-à-vis the increasing expectations.²⁰ One of Hill's six prospects for the EU's international role advocates the organization as a mediator of conflicts. A follow-up study of Asle Toje that elaborates on Hill's theory argues that the capability-expectations gap has decreased since the EU acquired the necessary competencies and institutions. However, the gap evolved into the member states' inability to agree, which Toje redefines as the "consensus-expectations" gap that restrained the union from taking action and realizing its capacity.²¹ In this sense, later studies were concerned with the cohesion criteria of the EU's actorness. For instance, Joseph Jupille and James A. Caporaso categorize the three dimensions of cohesion as preference, procedural-tactical, and output, and Erik Brattberg and Mark Rhinard refer to cohesion in either values, preferences, internal procedures, or policy outputs in relation to whether they are compatible and explicit in an EU context.²² While several studies concentrated their efforts on analyzing the capability-expectations gap, others, such as Stefania Panebianco and Giuseppe Balducci, distinguished the objectives from the results attained by the EU.²³

Other scholars discussing the impact and role of the EU employed concepts such as "actorness, presence, and influence" and tried to contextualize the EU's interaction at international and regional levels. For instance, Hettne perceives the EU as a regional actor based on the concepts of regions, presence, and

actorness.²⁴ Hettne claims that the performance of the EU as an actor in global affairs is not remarkable as it should be, but its presence is developing. Both Maull and Hettne consider the EU's presence as the main source of influence. Roy Ginsberg suggests evaluating the influence of the European Union by observing the degree to which another actor alters its policy after being affected by the EU's action or presence.²⁵ Many researchers challenge the understanding of the EU's influence on effectiveness. Hence, they focus

on the external/outside dimension and the relationship between actorness and effectiveness. For Bretherton and Vogler, the ability to act effectively depends on the opportunity, described as "the external context of events and ideas that enables or constrains the EU action." Louise Van Schaik interprets the actorness and effectiveness of the EU through the prism of goal attainment.²⁶ Ginsberg argues that the impact of outputs on the outside world will determine the effectiveness of the EU.²⁷ Yet, Katie Verlin Laatikainen and Karin Smith mention that there are very scant specific and systemic empirical analyses on EU effectiveness and the relationship between actorness and effectiveness.

The enlargement and neighborhood were considered the first policies of the union in which soft power was openly used in official public declarations

The concept of smart power was among the proposed roles of the EU in global affairs. Formulated by Nye, smart power refers to the strategies that combine hard and soft powers.²⁸ In such a case, the union needs to overcome two major challenges: First, to provide more consistency between the civilian and military sides, and second, to use soft power strategically. The European Commission defines this approach as the "soft power of persuasion."²⁹ The *European Neighborhood Policy* (ENP), climate change, energy security, and its role in crisis management are considered part of the EU's strategy to increase its role in international affairs. The enlargement and neighborhood were considered the first policies of the union in which soft power was openly used in official public declarations. For instance, the speeches of the Commissioner for External Relations and ENP Benita Ferrero-Waldner on foreign affairs pointed out the significance of the EU's soft power in the world. Ferrero-Waldner explicitly referred to the role of the ENP as an instrument to employ and increase the EU's "soft power."³⁰ Likewise, the European Security Strategy proposed the ENP as a means to display the EU as a significant actor. The access to the European market and the assistance programs of the EU are exposed as considerable carrots.³¹

Similarly, a renewed debate on EU actorness led to the emergence of new theoretical perspectives by the end of the 1990s. Among the most-cited works on EU actorness, Jupille and Caporaso and Bretherton and Vogler proposed different dimensions and understandings of actorness. Jupille and Caporaso

Europe has been perceived as a feasible export option located in the closest geographic proximity to the hydrocarbon resources of the Eastern Mediterranean

considered the EU a hybrid and developing entity and devised four criteria of actorness, which partly specified the indicators.³² Their well-known criteria included recognition, authority, cohesion, and autonomy. Bretherton and Vogler based the concept of the EU's actorness on a set of external and internal factors and interacting processes: namely opportunity, presence, and capability.³³ They reflected on the EU's changing position in the world and acknowledged the importance, for the EU's future, of becoming and being an international actor in a multi-actor global system. The main framework of actorness considered opportunity as a precondition, which included the changing external environments and global balance of power. Presence referred to "the ability of the EU, by virtue of its existence, to exert influence beyond its borders. The third criterion highlighted "the availability of, and capacity to utilize, policy instruments."³⁴ The "availability of instruments" formulated the available resources, ranging from diplomatic tools, aid mechanisms, military missions to trade agreements. The second element, "capacity to utilize," delineated whether and how the existing resources can affect a specific issue.

The ground-breaking study of Bretherton and Vogler not only theorizes actorness but also delimits the contours of the EU's actorness in international affairs. Presence is one of the three pillars of actorness, whereas Jupille and Caporaso briefly mention its importance in their framework. Besides, Jupille and Caporaso underplay the importance of tools and resources to pursue policy goals. On the contrary, Bretherton and Vogler focus on the availability of instruments within a range of diplomatic tools, aid mechanisms, military missions, and trade agreements. Bretherton and Vogler's inclusion of the opportunity for action and the geopolitical landscape where the EU attempts to exert influence into the criteria of actorness are valuable contributions. Within this context, this study illustrates the political context and evaluates from the lenses of Bretherton and Vogler the presence and influence of the EU in the Eastern Mediterranean region. The EU's impact in shaping a particular geo-political context may shed light on the scholarly debates over the EU's role as a global actor.

Shifting Regional Geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean

The discovery of hydrocarbon deposits in the late 2000s generated new dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Energy-related cooperation, strategies, conflicts, and tensions provided the basis of existing alignments.

In that vein, two tripartite regional strategic cooperations have emerged. The first alignment was between Israel- Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus (GASC), Greece, and the second alignment was between Egypt-GASC-Greece. The cooperation schemes between Israel-GASC-Greece and Egypt-GASC-Greece have not been formalized with an agreement or treaty. Instead, they have been carried out through tacit agreements, memorandum of understanding, joint declarations, treaties of cooperation, press conferences, and declarations.³⁵ On the other hand, sharing of Eastern Mediterranean subsea areas between Israel, Egypt, Cyprus, Palestine, Lebanon, Türkiye, and Syria, and delimitation of the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) added to the existing territorial disputes, regional security problems, and instability. These stranded relations between Türkiye, GASC, Israel, and Lebanon further posed an intricate geopolitical puzzle.³⁶

The regional geopolitical context has already been affected by the global economic crisis of 2008-2009 and the successive Arab Uprisings. The Arab uprising exacerbated the tensions among the states in the wider Mediterranean region. As a result, Türkiye's interaction within the region has significantly increased. The changing dynamics after Arab Spring in the region paved the way for a counter-regional strategy of cooperation, which excluded Türkiye and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) from the collaborative frameworks. Strategic cooperation between Israel-GASC-Greece and Egypt-GASC-Greece is based on energy-related opportunities and constraints. The geopolitical environment and complex security equation within the region created the dynamics for alignment between these two groups of countries. The exploration and drilling operations in the Eastern Mediterranean have been carried out mostly by major energy players such as the ENI and the Exxon-Mobile-Qatar Petroleum consortium, which discovered the gas reserves in Cyprus. The Noble Energy and Delek Drilling companies signed gas field development plans with Israel and the consortium of ENI-Total-Novatek involved in Lebanon's energy development process.³⁷ On the other hand, the state-owned Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Company (EGAS) in Egypt commercialized the Zohr gas reserves, and Türkiye engaged in drilling activities via its national energy company, the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO).

Since an early stage, Europe has been perceived as a feasible export option located in the closest geographic proximity to the hydrocarbon resources of the Eastern Mediterranean. The Eastern Mediterranean gas was regarded as a potential resource for providing diversification to Europe's energy supply and counterbalancing the EU's energy need against Russian gas.³⁸ The European energy policy has more recently prioritized diversifying its supply away from Russia after the assertive Russian policies in Ukraine and the Syrian crisis. That's why there were economic and strategic benefits to supporting energy projects that would strengthen the EU members, GASC and Greece, and

countries with which the EU has strong relations, such as Türkiye, Israel, and Egypt.³⁹ In line with this, the *European Commission Report on European Energy Security Strategy* in 2014 stated, “The EU should engage in intensified political and trade dialogue with the Eastern Mediterranean partners to create a Mediterranean gas hub in the South of Europe.”⁴⁰ A year later, the *Energy Diplomacy Action Plan* of the EU (EU EDAP) indicated “the strategic potential of the Eastern Mediterranean region for the EU’s diversification of sources, suppliers, and routes.”⁴¹

Therefore, the EU diplomatically and financially supported energy projects or the initiatives such as the EastMed pipeline, which aimed at bringing Levantine resources to the European market. The most ambitious proposal, the EastMed pipeline, considered the longest undersea pipeline, would link and transport the gas from Israel to Italy via Cyprus and Greece. The plan was revealed in April 2017 during a summit involving the Israeli, Greek, Cypriot, and Italian energy ministers. The project’s assessment by the European Commission was positive and regarded as an important option among other existing and possible future evacuation routes for the export of gas from the region to the EU. On the other hand, the proposed route faced significant technical and economic challenges. Repairs are estimated to be costly and dangerous, and it has been so far unclear how the security of the pipelines could be provided. Although the EU politically supports the EastMed pipeline project and considers it a project of common interest between the EU and the region, many analysts question its feasibility.

Initiators of the project tried to secure export deals and routes with acceptable profit margins within the European gas markets to encourage the energy industry to take the lead in the project’s construction. Among the European countries, Italy engaged most in Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbons, whose largest oil company ENI has been the primary developer of Egypt’s Zohr field, which has also been exploring other Eastern Mediterranean waters. In the beginning, Italy was interested in the development of the project as it would be the final destination of the proposed EastMed pipeline. However, a statement by Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte revealed that the EastMed pipeline might not be the only option to transport gas reserves from the East Mediterranean to Italy.⁴² Later research claimed that the EastMed pipeline project is so expensive that construction would require a very expensive selling price.⁴³ The expected gas deliveries are not expected to be able to compete with the existing supplies from Russia or any liquefied natural gas (LNG) possibilities.⁴⁴

An alternative to the EastMed pipeline is the Egyptian option, which would transport Israeli and Greek Cypriot gas to Egypt for re-export to Europe or Asia via LNG facilities. In August 2016, Egypt and GASC signed an agreement to construct a pipeline. Although the EastMed pipeline was considered

to have a strong political rationale, its economic and technical rationale is uncertain. However, the integrated development of natural gas resources has the potential to play a crucial role in partially satisfying the energy security of Europe by diversifying its sources and routes of supply. Combining the gas resources of Israel, Cyprus, and Egypt could create a bigger pool and become more attractive to Europe.⁴⁵ Accordingly, the Italian energy company ENI envisioned connecting the Zohr gas discovery in Egypt with Libya and Cyprus and creating an LNG hub in the Eastern Mediterranean. The more optimistic prospects indicated the best natural gas export option for Cyprus and Israel to Europe is through Türkiye. The political developments that led to the normalization of Turkish and Israeli relations raised expectations for building a subsea pipeline project that would link Israel's gas field to Türkiye.⁴⁶ Due to the proximity of Israeli and Cypriot fields to Türkiye, the transport cost is estimated to be relatively lower. However, the installation of a subsea system before the resolution of the Cyprus dispute is not feasible. Besides, Türkiye does not recognize the delimitation treaties of the EEZ that GASC has signed with Israel and Egypt.



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The changing international and domestic factors led Türkiye to redefine its engagement in the Eastern Mediterranean as of the mid-2010s and to pursue a proactive and assertive approach toward exploring hydrocarbons and the entitlements to undersea resources.⁴⁷ After Türkiye's first seismographic research vessel, Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa ceased the regular seismic surveys between 2013 and 2014, the vessel was sent again in April 2017 to continue exploration activities almost three years later. Next, the ENI's drilling activities were stopped by the intervention of Turkish naval vessels in February 2018. With the resumption of hydrocarbon exploration in May 2019, two deep-sea drillships, Fatih and Yavuz, carried out several drilling operations in the region. Behind the disputes over the exploration and drilling activities and the delimitation of the EEZ, there is a de facto division of Cyprus and a non-recognition of the GASC related to the ownership rights over the production, export, and transport of the resources. As a non-signatory of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Türkiye's position is based on the principles of agreement and equitable solution through a multilateral approach as opposed to Greece and the GASC.⁴⁸ Another crucial aspect of Türkiye's position is advocating the rights of the Turkish Cypriot community both on the island and in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The wide dispersion of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a temporary pause in Eastern Mediterranean energy politics. The negative economic impact of

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the COVID-19 lockdowns, fall in gas prices and uncertainty regarding the demand for energy resources disrupted the international oil companies' exploration and drilling activities. Regardless of the pandemic, Türkiye has not halted drilling in the region. The President of the Türkiye Energy Strategies and Politics Research Center (TESPAM), Oğuzhan Akyener, stated that Türkiye continues exploration activities in the Eastern Mediterranean with the support of public finance in its maritime zone,

though many oil companies now avoid "risky ventures."⁴⁹ Alongside the geopolitical and economic challenges of the Eastern Mediterranean, the global economic crises after the COVID-19 pandemic led to uncertainties that greatly impacted the region's energy potential.⁵⁰

From a positive point of view, the Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon discoveries are expected to be an incentive to achieve stability, ease turbulence, break political hostilities, resolve intractable conflicts and facilitate a rapprochement between Israel and Arab countries as well as GASC and Türkiye. There was hope for greater regional stability and a closer relationship with Europe. In contrast, the discoveries have contributed to the existing tensions and brought a new geopolitical reality by changing regional dynamics and relations.

Assessing the Presence, Visibility, and Impact of the EU

This section exhibits the EU's actorness in a particular geographic region,⁵¹ namely the Eastern Mediterranean context. From the start, there has not been a unified EU policy toward the Eastern Mediterranean "reflected in the competing geopolitical imaginings of the Mediterranean and expressed by diverse European Union member states."⁵² Greece and GASC as EU member states and regional actors and France as a policy entrepreneur toward the wider Mediterranean gradually influenced the formation of a European policy toward the region. Türkiye has been an EU candidate among the regional actors since 1999, and Israel, Lebanon, and Egypt are part of the ENP. All Eastern Mediterranean countries are partners in the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Hence, maintaining stability in the region and contributing to the development of a possible new source of energy supply have increasingly been emphasized in the EU circles.

The European Commission was initially very cautious toward the Eastern Mediterranean gas due to political instability, uncertain reserves, and com-



Foreign Ministers of Luxembourg Jean Asselborn (L) and Germany Heiko Maas (C) meet at the EU Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels, Belgium to review recent developments, including the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, September 21, 2020.

DURSUN AYDEMİR / AA

mercial benefits. The Eastern Mediterranean gas has mostly been discussed within informal frameworks and levels of the EU. However, the European institutions were reluctant to take an incentive. In early 2015, there was a change after the European *Energy Diplomacy Action Plan* acknowledged the potential of the gas reserves for Europe. The EU's detailed *Energy Diplomacy Action Plan* prioritized independent development of the reserves from the Southern Corridor.⁵³ The EU EDAP was regarded as a sound basis for reinforcing the European Commission's diplomatic efforts and employing appropriate financial mechanisms of the EU to exert influence on regional energy developments hereafter.⁵⁴ In brief, the EU EDAP was the first attempt of the EU to engage in Euro-Mediterranean energy policymaking.

A more assertive step was taken in June 2015, when the European Commission launched the Euro-Mediterranean gas platform that aimed at facilitating dialogue, partnerships, and strengthening cooperation among the union members of the Mediterranean. The Euro-Mediterranean platform was expected to strengthen the security of supply, promote cooperation on gas exploration, and support the building of required infrastructure for production and transportation.⁵⁵ In a volatile region such as the Eastern Mediterranean, diplomatic initiatives by the EU are considered to have a significant impact on tackling highly politicized natural gas resources. Thus, the EU primarily aimed to strengthen stability and security and foster cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean by supporting trilateral partnerships and cooperation schemes between the regional countries. In 2018, during a Foreign Affairs Council meeting, the Foreign and Defense Ministers of GASC stated that the formation of

The trilateral agreement between Greece, Israel, and GASC was viewed as a positive example of cooperation among the major regional states and received firm support from the EU

ffective support of the EU to strengthen regional cooperation on natural gas brought additional countries together. The energy ministers of Egypt, GASC, Greece, Israel, Italy, and the Palestinian territories and a representative of the energy minister of Jordan met in early 2019 to sign the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF). The founding members of the EMGF decided to enhance cooperation on the exploitation of natural gas reserves in the region. The forum is regarded as an example of change in the region, wherein economic interests prevailed over the political and military rivalries, despite Türkiye, Lebanon, and Syria not participating.⁵⁷ Lebanon and Syria were invited to join later, but Türkiye remained excluded. Soon the EMGF evolved into a recognized international organization, which is a distinct association of the Arab and European states in a regional mechanism. Joint membership of the regional countries in an organization is considered a positive development that could initiate a new dialogue and an incentive for resolving the intractable Israeli-Palestinian and Cyprus conflicts. Likewise, the EU could offer incentives to partner countries to merge their energy reserves and pipeline networks and create an environment to improve security and trust in the region.⁵⁸ This could enhance the EU's visibility and impact in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In contrast, the EU's increasingly voiced solidarity with Greece and GASC vis-à-vis the Turkish energy activities triggered further regional instability. Türkiye's earlier exploration in the Mediterranean and military actions to prevent further drilling of the Nobel Energy and ENI ships have faced reactions. Tension re-escalated in July 2019 when a Turkish drilling vessel launched offshore drilling operations on the western coast of Cyprus. During the EU Ministers for European Affairs meeting, serious concern over Türkiye's drilling activities was expressed, and the European External Action Service was invited "to submit options for appropriate measures without delay."⁵⁹ The EU has increasingly been involved in the Eastern Mediterranean region by issuing a European External Action Service statement pointing out that Greek and Cypriot borders constitute European borders and ardently supported Greek and Greek

tripartite partnerships and the policy of strengthening the relations with neighboring countries in the region had been the essence of the EU's security and defense policy that GASC demonstrated commitment to.⁵⁶

The EU envisioned playing a role in resolving disputes, encouraging regional actors to reach EEZ delimitation and pipeline routes agreements, and supporting regional cooperation. In this direction, ef-

Cypriot pledges. This was viewed as a signal of the EU's enhancing position as a geopolitical actor that could extend its influence across its neighborhood. In response to Türkiye's decision to start a new drilling operation within the EEZ of Cyprus, the EU reaffirmed its earlier position drawn by the European Council (June 2019 and October 2019) conclusions, which condemned Türkiye's actions in the Eastern Mediterranean. The EU27 note and the EU foreign ministers May 15, 2020, statement pronounced the EU's solidarity with GASC, reiterated the call on Türkiye to refrain from such actions, and invited the creation of an environment conducive to dialogue.⁶⁰

Ultimately, the EU approved a sanctions mechanism against Türkiye's gas drilling within the territorial waters of Cyprus. The EU foreign ministers stated that the mechanism was a tool to "sanction individuals or entities responsible for, or involved in, unauthorized drilling activities of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean."⁶¹ Previously, the EU enacted disciplinary measures to repel Turkish drilling, such as holding air transport agreement talks and decreasing financial assistance. As a reaction, Türkiye signed agreements with Libya in November 2019 on "security and military cooperation," "restriction of marine jurisdictions," and a memorandum of understanding on the delimitation of maritime jurisdictions.⁶² The new maritime agreement designating the Libyan-Turkish zone cut through Greek waters, thus, Greece expelled the Libyan ambassador and broke off diplomatic relations with Libya. Afterward, Greece, GASC, and Israel announced their decision to sign an agreement aiming to continue developing the EastMed pipeline to transport natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe.

Global and regional powers, including the U.S., Russia, Egypt, Israel, and the EU, have denounced the Türkiye-Libya agreement. A draft EU statement supporting Greece notified that the agreement "infringes upon the sovereign rights of third states, does not comply with the Law of the Sea and cannot produce any legal consequences," hence, it cannot be binding for Greece.⁶³ For the Turkish side, the agreement with Libya was a reaction to the unilateral contracts signed by GASC, Greece, and Egypt with international companies that granted licenses in oil and gas exploration zones in the Mediterranean. In due course, the EU threatened to impose further sanctions on the existing Turkish drilling operations off the coast of Cyprus. However, Türkiye has not stepped back from drilling for natural gas and military activities in the region. In January 2020, Israel, Greece, and GASC retaliated by instantly signing a trilateral EastMed pipeline agreement to transport Eastern Mediterranean gas by connecting Israel's offshore fields with Europe, which was envisaged to supply around 10 percent of the EU's natural gas needs.⁶⁴ The trilateral agreement between Greece, Israel, and GASC was viewed as a positive example of cooperation among the major regional states and received firm support from the EU. However, such reciprocal actions have added new dimensions to existing

conflicts in the region, with drilling ships being harassed by naval vessels for the allegations of illegal drilling.

Nevertheless, the tone of the EU changed by December 2020. In the final document of the European Council Summit on December 10-11, 2020, the EU decided not to impose new sanctions against Türkiye's unilateral engagements in the Eastern Mediterranean, except for the hydrocarbon exploration of the officials, entities, and institutions in the region.⁶⁵ Before the meeting, Türkiye withdrew the Oruç Reis vessel from the Eastern Mediterranean. The European Council supported the de-escalation of tension in the Eastern Mediterranean via the discontinuation of drilling activities and called for diplomatic dialog and the resumption of direct talks between Greece and Türkiye. A recent statement of the members of the European Council on March 25, 2021, noted the withdrawal of the Oruç Reis, reiterated the offer of a positive EU-Türkiye agenda and proposed to "engage with Türkiye in a phased, proportionate and reversible manner to enhance cooperation in a number of areas of common interest" based on sustained de-escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean region.⁶⁶

After all, the EU's decision to impose sanctions on Türkiye faced reluctance from some member states. Greece, GASC, and France have been pursuing assertive policies regarding Türkiye's stance in the Eastern Mediterranean. France allied with Greece and GASC, and even its military engaged "with its warplanes recently on exercise over Cyprus, while its warships patrol with the Greek navy" and performed an increased military activity in the Eastern Mediterranean not seen for generations.⁶⁷ However, the other EU member states assumed a more cautious approach toward Türkiye. Italy was reluctant to denounce the Türkiye-Libya agreement, and Spain was instrumental in the diplomatic initiatives and supported Germany to mediate between Türkiye and Greece.⁶⁸ As the mediator of the Türkiye-EU deal on the refugee crisis of 2015, Germany preferred resuming dialogue with Türkiye due to its political, economic, and security concerns.

The European Council conclusions of October 2020 already exhibited the EU's stalemate on tackling the region's recent dynamics. The October 2020 EU summit conclusions stated that "Provided constructive efforts to stop illegal activities vis-à-vis Greece and GASC are sustained, the European Council has agreed to launch a positive political EU-Türkiye agenda with a specific emphasis on the modernization of the Customs Union and trade facilitation, people to people contacts, high-level dialogues, and continued cooperation on migration issues."⁶⁹ Next, the EU declared the willingness to engage Türkiye with further decisions on the customs union, high-level dialogue, and people-to-people contact and mobility at the March 2021 European Council summit.⁷⁰ In short, the EU conditionally offered a positive political EU-Türkiye agenda.

Following the EU leaders' decision in December 2020 not to draw up new sanctions, Türkiye largely suspended the exploration activities and resumed high-level talks with Athens to de-escalate tensions.⁷¹ These developments drew praise from former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who carried out telephone diplomacy with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. German-led EU dialogue initiatives show that a constructive approach can bring positive outcomes for the resolution of the broader issues in the Eastern Mediterranean. From a positive perspective, this can be considered the first sign of the EU's capability to become an effective regional actor. Then again, Türkiye's claims to the maritime zones and the hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean have not changed. From a negative perspective, this can be an exemplar of how the lack of a unified policy undermined the EU's influence. The article implies that an active EU conflict resolution policy, diplomatic efforts, and European financial mechanisms can potentially increase the EU's impact on the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Regional cooperation and collaboration on gas exploitation and maritime deals can enable the realization of energy projects by changing geopolitical dynamics, contributing to regional energy security, and attracting foreign ventures

Conclusion

Previous studies indicate that the EU's actorness can be approached from a geographical dimension. This article aims to apply the EU actorness framework of Bretherton and Vogler to a hitherto unexplored case of the Eastern Mediterranean region. The conceptual foundation provides a perspective to examine the EU's role in the Eastern Mediterranean region through the elements of presence, capacity, and opportunity. The European Union's presence and influence in the Eastern Mediterranean have substantially increased over the last decade. The consecutive decisions of the European Council conclusions, the EU Ministers for European Affairs meeting results, and External Action Service statements can be perceived as a signal of the EU's enhancing position and extension of its influence across the Eastern Mediterranean region.

In the contentious context of the Eastern Mediterranean region, the main strategic interest of the EU has been a stable and secure environment. In this sense, the recent decisions of the European Council summit meetings, which contributed to the de-escalation of the tension in the Eastern Mediterranean and the resumption of high-level talks between Türkiye and Greece, give the very first signs of the capability of the EU's actions to be more effective. In a similar vein, the EU can instigate regional stability, promote cooperation for

The EU has a presence and displays particular elements of actorness in the Eastern Mediterranean

energy development plans and facilitate the resolution of conflicting maritime borders. Regional cooperation and collaboration on gas exploitation and maritime deals can enable the realization of energy projects by changing geopolitical dynamics, contributing to regional energy security, and attracting foreign ventures.⁷² In light of the global pandemic, petrol price volatility, and

the dispute around the Eastern Mediterranean gas fields, cooperative arrangements can be reached through negotiation, which can be facilitated within the EU framework.

The gradual withdrawal of the U.S. from the wider Middle East region allows the EU to play a bigger role in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Having started from the President Barack Obama Administration, the U.S. has been expecting Europe to take on a bigger role, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean, since the clash has been between Türkiye and the two EU member states, Greece and GASC.⁷³ On the other hand, the lack of coordination among the 27 member states, the divergence of opinion, and differing priorities and policies undermine the EU's capacity to play a consistent or leading role in the region. To be an actor and maneuver in the puzzling waters of the Eastern Mediterranean, the EU needs to overcome the combined effect of the emergence of new actors and shifting alliances, take decisive actions, and reinforce its diplomatic capacity and cooperation mechanism. An assertive EU policy can contribute to the mechanisms through which regional stability and multi-lateral communication can take place. Accordingly, the EU needs to continue providing incentives to foster cooperation among the regional actors. In this way, the EU can contribute to the establishment of stability, security, and peace in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

A multi-criteria assessment framework is derived from the multiple perspectives on the EU's actorness in the literature. Although scholars disagree on how to measure the EU's role as an international actor, many scholars concur that the EU has an international presence. The EU's capacity to extend its influence beyond its borders extended further than the earlier debate stage. The EU's global influence differs across space and time; hence, the EU's action, capacity, and impact require evaluation from a broader perspective. Bretherton and Vogler define actorness as the capacity to make decisions and act accordingly. For them, capacity reflects the interaction between internal and external structures surrounded by constraints and opportunities. Based on this conceptual framework, the study suggests that the EU has a presence and displays particular elements of actorness in the Eastern Mediterranean. Hitherto, the EU's actorness has not changed Türkiye's regional stance. Though the EU increased its visibility, its reach is limited. ■

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