

## **THE WESTERN WORLD AND THE GEOPOLITICAL BALANCES OF THE WIDER EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN**

**SUMMARY - OBJECTIVE:** The West is at the centre of a volatile international environment and faces a number of significant challenges. Western responses need to be timely and decisive. One of the most important areas of interest is the Eastern Mediterranean, a traditionally Western-influenced region, whose volatile developments require foresight and realism. The purpose of this article is to describe the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, identify the sources of instability and suggest the best approach for Western interests.

**INTERNATIONAL SITUATION:** The gradual transformation of the international system into a multipolar one challenges the primacy of the West which is facing economic, energy, demographic and migration issues. The BRICS alliance is growing its membership to 11 (more to come), is becoming stronger in critical resources, operating its own development bank and gestating its own currency. The degree of control over maritime lines of communication is a critical variable. It is a positive development for the West that India intends to link India to the Persian Gulf and Europe in terms of trade and energy, and it seems natural and appropriate that this interconnection should include the Greece-Cyprus-Israel axis.

Western vital interests in Africa are constantly being damaged, mainly to the benefit of China, Russia and Turkey. The coups in Mali (2020), Chad (2021), Burkina Faso (three times in 2022) and Niger (2023) and the partial withdrawal of the West confirm this fact. Multiple sources of instability coexist in Africa, with what this means for the future of an ageing Europe especially from the expected rapid increase in mass illegal migration of populations. The more than 25 million immigrants in Europe from Africa and Asia are raising issues related to social cohesion and security (including influence from foreign centers), and threatening European integration due to the rise of extreme political parties, etc. The main cause of these effects is the difference in the values of the majority of these immigrants (including theocracy versus secular state), which makes it very difficult for them to assimilate.

Indications are that the particularly costly (in terms of money and especially human lives) conflict in Ukraine will continue into 2024. Any failure of the Ukrainian counter-attack will test Western cohesion, while its success is expected to escalate the conflict to a dangerous level. In any negotiations between the two sides, Ukraine will need to be strong enough to set conditions for a future without further incursions. The outcome of the 2024 US elections, as well as the possibility of a Russian military presence in the Americas, will be decisive for further developments.

The fragile balances in the Balkans justify their title as "Europe's powder keg". Historical rivalries, ethnic and religious minorities, extreme Islam, dysfunctional rule of law and corruption, states' hegemonic expansionist visions and the interests of regional and big powers create a difficult and dangerous environment which rather than accelerating the integration of the states in the region into Western institutions, as some would like, in fact makes the process more difficult and more time consuming.

Europe's long relapse into dependence on Russian hydrocarbons is now testing its energy security following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The green transition is a legitimate but costly and, as predicted, significantly long-term goal. Until then, Europe will have to optimise hydrocarbon imports and minimise exclusive suppliers or exclusive energy transit routes, especially through unreliable states which often use blackmail to achieve their interests.

#### **WIDER EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND DESTABILIZING FACTORS:**

The critical geopolitical value of the Eastern Mediterranean, in the midst of three continents and important maritime communication routes, causes transnational rivalries. In contrast to the Cold War period, the lack of a comprehensive US strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean and the misguided political message of abandoning the region were quickly exploited by anti-Western powers, state and non-state (e.g. Russia, China, Iran, extremist Islam, etc.).

Russia is gaining a permanent naval presence in Syria while Iran is seeking a land bridge of influence to the Eastern Mediterranean, via Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, approaching dangerously close to Israel. Russia with Turkey tolerate or facilitate Azerbaijan against Armenia. Islamic terrorist organisations contribute to the instability and also their state sponsors helping them or even moving thousands of their extremist members to "war by proxy" (e.g. Turkey's practice in Libya). Consequently, Western investment in authoritarian, repressive, opportunistic or structurally differentiated states is a high-risk move. Extensive and deep relations with all states in the region serve the West well, but the assignment of roles and control in the region should involve states really aligned with it.

Greece does not just belong to the West, as it has historically proved, but is the West, since its relationship with the West is not conjunctural but fundamentally value-based and has existed since the origins of Western civilization. The fact that Hellenism dominates geographically in the Eastern Mediterranean forming a solid geopolitical space from Corfu to Cyprus is a vital Western advantage. The Greek seas provide access to three continents and the most important lines of global communication. The Greek islands and Cyprus control the wider area of the Eastern Mediterranean. Souda occupies a unique strategic position, while Alexandroupolis, Thessaloniki and Kavala are connected through their ports to the European mainland, bypassing the Straits. The ports of Piraeus and the ports of Western Greece such as Patras, Corfu and Igoumenitsa are of obvious value.

Theocratic, revisionist and authoritarian Turkey is structurally moving away from the West, coming into conflict with it in several key areas of interest. With the political tools of Panturanism, Pan-Islamism and Neo-Ottomanism, as well as investment in military power (armed forces, defence industry, bases in selected states, etc.), Turkey is pursuing hegemonic ambitions (expansion at the expense of neighbours, wider influence) which are inevitably and profoundly destabilising. The Turkish tendency towards strategic autonomy is evident, with a simultaneous rapprochement with Eurasia and the Muslim world (close relations with Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkic-speaking states in Central Asia, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, the Islamic State, Islamic paramilitary organisations in Syria, strong penetration of

Africa and the Middle East, attempts to reach out to the BRICS and the SCO, etc.). Turkey is also present in Europe with millions of Muslim Turks or Muslim immigrants over whom it influences and directs their vote and behaviour. In this way, Turkey can exercise its policy by blackmail (e.g. Sweden's NATO membership in exchange for F16 aircraft, instrumentalization of migrants in exchange for money, EU accession without meeting criteria, elimination of sanctions against Turkey despite its violation of rules and pro-Russian policy, etc.).

Part of the Western decision-making centres maintains the illusion that Turkey is still necessary as a bulwark against China and Russia. In this context, the US tolerates and appeases Turkey, often damaging its prestige. The coincidence of the imminent decisions on Sweden's NATO membership with the issue of Turkey's acquisition of F16 viper aircraft and the meeting of Ministers Blinken and Fidan on the same day of the prosecution and impeachment of Senator Menendez, whom President Erdogan recently accused, is problematic. In Turkey, major internal problems are raging concerning the economy, human rights, the rule of law and, above all, the ongoing Kurdish issue, the tens of millions of Kurds who cannot be ignored by the West. In any case, the latter cannot succumb to threats and blackmail.

Turkish expansionist ambitions directly threaten Greece and Cyprus, while delaying the promotion of energy developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. The only basis for determining the manner of participation of each state in the region is the International Law of the Sea. Any arbitrary action that puts barriers to the whole energy process should be dealt with forcefully by the International Institutions and the West. The energy route to Europe should be routed through friendly Western waters and friendly states, while ensuring that no state becomes an exclusive or dominant energy transit hub, with a similar European dependence.

The unjust and unsustainable solution to the Cyprus problem is a factor of instability in the Eastern Mediterranean and is linked to the delay in the exploitation of the region's hydrocarbons to the benefit of Europe. The illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the occupation of its territory is similar to the corresponding Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and the illegal occupation of 37% of its territory since then. The basic arguments of the two invasions are largely identical, such as "protection of peers", "historical rights", "the requirement to create a vital security space", etc., and are centrally located outside any framework of international law. The credibility of Western sensitivity to Ukraine is being tested in Cyprus.

Turkey is seeking, according to its own statements, despite the direct violation of a number of provisions of International Law, the partition of Cyprus, the control of half of the Aegean and half of the South-Eastern Mediterranean. I wonder how much would the implementation of these claims by a country with regional hegemonic and nuclear ambitions like Turkey would benefit Western interests, as well as the interests of the states in the region? Within the framework of the EU and with Cyprus as a member state, the rule of law, democracy and the security and well-being of Turkish Cypriots are fully guaranteed on the island. The regime of occupation troops, of guarantees and the complete dependence of the occupied territories on Turkey, perpetuate instability, introduce undesirables to the island (e.g. hegemonic Turkey, Russia, extreme Islam, Iran, etc.) and harm Western geopolitical interests (military,

commercial, energy). The Cyprus problem remains an international issue of invasion and occupation. For Greece, a just and viable solution to the Cyprus problem must be an integral part of Greek-Turkish relations.

Open channels of communication are sought, but an effective and not pretextual dialogue between Greece and Turkey presupposes the absence of ultimatums, threats and fait accompli, a relative balance of power, common acceptance of International Law and International Treaties as a basis for discussion and, in addition, for the Cyprus issue, the full implementation of the European acquis. If "mutual concessions" are made, Turkey will give up part of its unilateral illegal claims, while Greece will give up its rights.

The current "good climate" (with Greece, Israel, Egypt, etc.) is considered to be a temporary Turkish tactic until it reaps the expected benefits from the West (funding, F16 or F35 aircraft, abolition of visas and customs benefits in the EU, beneficial MOUs in the Aegean, energy benefits in the South-Eastern Mediterranean, favorable Cyprus solution, etc.). The doctrinally unyielding unilateral Turkish illegal claims by Greece and Cyprus, maintain in their essence the Greek-Turkish relations as zero-sum relations and any international "surrender", or general and vague pressure for "dialogue", harms Greek national interests, and exacerbates instability.

**CONCLUSION:** If the West as we know it wishes to survive, it will have to defend in every way its value system (mainly democracy, secular state), to face the explosive combination of demographic and immigration issues, to defend the security of its territories, seas and spheres of influence, its economy, its energy security, its resources, technology, as well as its sea and land communication routes. The 'bridge' between the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic and the consideration of this large region as a single geopolitical security theatre is appropriate. The West should further promote collective security and fill regional power gaps. After the Ukrainian experience, European defense integration should be accelerated.

The tense situation in the wider Eastern Mediterranean must be normalised by resolutely isolating any destabilising factor. The underwater deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean should be exploited as soon as possible for the benefit of Europe and with low geopolitical risk energy routes. The sources of instability in the Eastern Mediterranean should be controlled (e.g. withdrawal of foreign troops and paramilitaries from the northern shores of Africa and the Middle East, a just and viable solution to the Cyprus problem, isolation of revisionist states practicing coercive policies, combating Islamic terrorism, elimination of the trafficking of human souls, etc.). The EU, as a direct stakeholder, must play an active and dynamic role in both the energy issue and Cyprus problem linked to one of its Member States. The axes of strategic cooperation between states are legitimate as long as they are based on international law and international treaties.

Greece maintains steadily good relations with all the states of the wider region of the Eastern Mediterranean. An exception is the hitherto consistently threatening and expansionist Turkey, with which open channels of communication are maintained, but the country's compliance and respect for international law, as well as its adaptation to the spirit of good neighbourliness, are expected. Greece's prominent geographical

position makes it a central hub for Western interests in the wider region (from Eastern Europe to the Indian Ocean). As a member of the EU and NATO and structurally integrated into Western institutions, Greece has the potential to become a host, producer and redistributor of security and energy. Its geopolitical size, military capability and participation in strong alliances allow Greece to influence wider regional developments. In any case, Greece, as a status quo country, expects the required support and assistance from the West, since common interests are at stake and its aspirations are based on international law. Especially for the resolution of the Cyprus issue, the West should decisively demonstrate a similar sensitivity to that which it rightly showed towards Ukraine after the illegal Russian invasion. Finally, Greece should, after defining its national interests and national objectives, formulate a self-evident national deterrent strategy which it should communicate in every direction, taking as soon as possible all the necessary national measures for its fulfilment and making use of existing alliances.

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