

POSITIONING THE TURKISH NAVY IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN STRATEGIC TRIANGLE

Meysune YAŞAR 

İstanbul Medeniyet University (Türkiye)
E-mail: meysune.yasar@medeniyet.edu.tr

Abstract: This study analyses Türkiye's naval strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean within the framework of the strategic triangle model. By applying the strategic triangle model to the multidimensional competition evident in the Eastern Mediterranean, the author highlights three fundamental blocks of Türkiye's naval presence in the region: the transactive triangle, the stable triangle, and the fragile triangle. The transactive triangle comprises the United States, Israel, and Greece, together with the Greek Cypriot Administration in the Eastern Mediterranean, whereas the stable triangle includes Russia, Iran, and Syria. The study analyses the alliance models presented by these two structures in the Eastern Mediterranean through the strategic triangle approach and asks how Türkiye shapes its ability to act within these structures. It also presents the fragile triangle model as a reflection of the Turkish navy's steps towards autonomy and balance. It discusses the steps undertaken by Türkiye, Qatar, and Libya in this direction. The study discussing the stages using the fragile triangle model and examines the possibilities and limitations of Türkiye's long-term presence in the region.

Keywords: Eastern Mediterranean, Turkish Navy, United States, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Iran, Syria, Qatar, Libya, Strategic, Transactive, Stable Triangle.

Rezumat: Poziționarea marinei Turciei în triunghiul strategic al Mării Mediterane de Est. Acest studiu analizează strategia navală a Turciei în estul Mării Mediterane în cadrul modelului triunghiului strategic. Abordând temele competiției multidimensionale evidente în estul Mării Mediterane, cu ajutorul modelului triunghiului strategic, autorul evidențiază trei blocuri fundamentale în ceea ce privește prezența navală a Turciei în regiune: triunghiul

tranzacțional, triunghiul stabil și triunghiul fragil. Triunghiul tranzacțional se referă la Statele Unite, Israel, Grecia și administrația cipriotă greacă din estul Mediteranei, în timp ce triunghiul stabil se concentrează pe Rusia, Iran și Siria. Studiul analizează modelele de alianță prezентate de aceste două structuri în estul Mediteranei prin abordarea triunghiului strategic, interogând modul în care Turcia își modelează capacitatea de a acționa în cadrul acestor structuri. De asemenea, se prezintă modelul triunghiului fragil ca o reflectare a pașilor făcuți de marina turcă spre autonomie și echilibru, discutându-se măsurile luate de Turcia, Qatar și Libia în regiune, în această direcție. Sunt teoretizate aceste acțiuni, folosind modelul triunghiului fragil, și sunt examineate posibilitățile și limitările prezenței Turciei în regiune pe termen lung.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Eastern Mediterranean has become a multi-layered arena of competition involving not only regional states but also global actors. The discovery of energy resources, disputes over maritime jurisdiction, military build-ups, and diplomatic manoeuvres have turned this region into a geopolitical battleground. However, this competition is not shaped solely by energy or security concerns; it is also understood through alliance relationships and triangular structures. This study aims to examine actors in the Eastern Mediterranean not only at the bilateral level but also within multilateral and flexible alliance structures. In this context, the leading state groups in the region are redefined through Edward Dittmer's geopolitical triangle model (stable, transactive, and fragile triangles). The stable triangle, consisting of relatively fixed partnerships such as Russia–Iran–Syria; the transactive triangle, based on flexible cooperation such as the US–Israel–Greece–Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus (GCASC); and the fragile triangle, which includes structures that are open to external influences and volatile, such as Türkiye–Qatar–Libya, form the building blocks of this analysis. These multiple triangular structures in the Eastern Mediterranean provide critical data for understanding not only the regional order but also the regional proxy strategies of global powers. This is because the region is at the intersection of numerous variables, such as energy security, military projection, port access, and diplomatic prestige. Therefore, alliances are being reshaped not only by ideological or traditional ties but also by interest-based, temporary, strategic, and sometimes tactical forms.

This study offers an alternative perspective on the current power architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean by examining how these alliance

structures have developed, both theoretically and in practice, and under what conditions they have become fragile or strengthened. By examining Türkiye's regional position through its relations with the transactive and stable triangles, the study highlights the Turkish navy's steps in the region, particularly in the construction of a fragile triangle. Alongside these steps, the study examines Türkiye's alliance relations in the Eastern Mediterranean and the possibilities and limitations of these alliances in the long term, revealing the Turkish navy's position between deterrence and balancing. In this regard, the first chapter presents the alliance structures through the conceptual framework and triangle models in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the second chapter, the steps taken by the United States, Israel, Greece, and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus (GCASC) in the region are examined through the transactive triangle model. In contrast, in the third chapter, the naval presence of Russia, Iran, and Syria in the Eastern Mediterranean is discussed under the stable triangle model. The final section examines how the Turkish navy positions itself in the region relative to these two triangles and discusses steps toward constructing a fragile triangle with respect to balance and deterrence.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Strategic Triangle Approach is a theoretical framework developed to explain the system of relations among major powers in international relations. Lowell Dittmer (1981), widely regarded as the founder of this approach, analyses power balances based on the nature of bilateral ties among three leading actors. In his 1981 work, *The Strategic Triangle*, Dittmer analysed US-USSR-China relations using a triangular model and explained how such tripartite relationships can create balance or tension.¹ According to Dittmer, three-actor relationships have different dynamics from bilateral relationships; the nature of each actor's relationship with the other two determines the structure of the triangle, and actors form, break, or develop temporary alliances within this triangle to maximise their own interests. The strategic triangle approach is based on the principle of power balance in classical realism. States seek to balance dominant power by forming alliances. With the end of the Cold War, the international system became less clearly polarised; however, strategic triangle structures persisted in various forms. In the new era, tripartite relations

¹ Lowell Dittmer, *The Strategic Triangle: An Elementary Game-Theoretical Analysis*, "World Politics", Vol. 33, 1981, no. 4, pp.485-515.

began to form mostly at the regional level, based on energy policies, security cooperation, military alliances and ideological affinities. While temporary alliances and pragmatic relations emerged after the Cold War, the analysis of short-term cooperation gained importance.²

However, the growing influence of countries such as India, Türkiye, and Iran within the triangular structure has heightened the importance of approaches to the presence of regional actors. Particularly in regions such as the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the Eastern Mediterranean, multi-actor and dynamic triangular interaction patterns that classical alliance theories fail to explain have brought the triangular model to the fore as an analytical unit.³ According to Dittmer, within the aforementioned areas of discussion, triangular actor structures can be 'stable', 'transactive' or 'fragile.' A stable triangle is a structure in which the three actors trust one another to some extent and in which the relationships are stable and grounded in mutual interests. In such triangles, there is clear cooperation among the actors, and they may adopt a collective stance towards the outside world. Within this triangle, mutual strategic alignment is high, military, diplomatic, and economic partnerships are well developed, and ideological affinity is maintained. In a transactive triangle, actors focus on multidimensional cooperation, and the tactical and conjunctural aspects of long-term cooperation predominate.⁴ Under this cooperation model, cooperation is area-focused, and actions by the parties to the triangle can have global consequences beyond their regional scope. The fragile triangle describes a network of relationships that, despite appearing stable on the surface, harbours competition and incompatibility at a deeper level. While alliances may persist in form, there are dynamics of mistrust, asymmetric dependence, and covert conflict among the actors. Balance can be maintained until one of the actors changes course. Under this triangular model, there is a temporary balance tied to the status quo, relationships contain strategic uncertainty, and the potential for conflict is high but suppressed.⁵

The status quo-dependent temporary balance, strategic uncertainty in relations, and the increased likelihood of conflict collectively characterise the

² G. John Ikenberry, *The End of Liberal International Order*, "International Affairs", Vol. 94, 2018, no. 1, pp. 9-16.

³ Lowell Dittmer, *op. cit.*, pp.491-510.

⁴ Mor Sobol, Yen Jung Chang, *Three's (Not Necessarily) A Crowd: State-of-the-Art Review of the Strategic Triangle*, "Political Studies Review", Vol. 22, 2023, no. 1, pp. 210-221.

⁵ Gilbert Rozman, *Strategic Triangles Reshaping International Relations in East Asia*, London – New York, Routledge, 2022, pp. 9-16; 38-54.

geopolitical situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Essentially, the Eastern Mediterranean region has become an area of intense geopolitical competition, energy policies and naval activity in recent years. In this context, there is a growing number of studies on the region in the international relations literature. These studies generally focus on the following axes: energy security and the sharing of natural gas resources;⁶ Türkiye's foreign policy and its goal of becoming a regional power;⁷ alliance structures and security architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean;⁸ and maritime jurisdiction areas and the international law dimension.⁹ Most of these studies examine power relations in the Eastern Mediterranean through bilateral disputes (e.g., Türkiye–Greece) or through single alliance systems (e.g., the EastMed Gas Forum). However, this approach falls short in analysing multilateral and temporary collaborations, balance politics, and the flexible orientations of actors in the region. At this point, the Strategic Triangle Approach provides a unique analytical framework for understanding the multilayered, time-varying, and often simultaneous triangular relationships among regional actors. Within the scope of this analysis, three distinct strategic triangle structures that stand out in the Eastern Mediterranean region and Türkiye's place within these structures have been identified:

Table 1: Prominent Strategic Triangular Structures
in the Eastern Mediterranean and Türkiye

Triangle Structure	Triangle Type	Core Foundation	Level of Fragility	Türkiye's Position
USA – Israel – Greece- GCASC	Transactive	Energy, security, and defence cooperation	Low	Actor seeking balance in an exclusive triangle

⁶ Andrea Prontera, Mariusz Ruszel, *Energy Security in the Eastern Mediterranean*, "Middle East Policy", Vol. 24, 2017, no. 3, pp. 145-158.

⁷ Amikam Nachmani, *A Threatening Sea, a Bridging Sea: Images and Perceptions of the Eastern Mediterranean – A View from Israel*, in Zenonas Tziaras (Ed.), *The New Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral Partnerships and Regional Security*, Report 3, 2019, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), pp. 31-52.

⁸ Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney, Vişne Korkmaz, *A New Alliance Axis in the Eastern Mediterranean Cold War: What the Abraham Accords Mean for Mediterranean Geopolitics and Turkey*, "Insight Turkey", Vol. 23, 2021, no. 1, pp. 61-76.

⁹ Levent Kirval, Arda Özkan, *The Delimitation Dispute of the Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Eastern Mediterranean: Turkish Perspective Based on the Equitable Principles*, "The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations", Vol. 52, 2021, no. 2, pp. 85-112.

Russia - Syria - Iran	Stable	Shared ideological and geopolitical interests	Medium	Actor with limited engagement outside the triangle
Türkiye - Qatar - Libya	Fragile	Military support, political alliance, ideological affinity	High	Foundational and balancing central actor

These structures are used to explain both the region's foreign policy orientations and Türkiye's balancing and proactive position within this multilateral structure. Qualitative methods were preferred in the research. The basic data sources comprise a literature review, official documents, regional cooperation agreements, UN and NATO records, statements by state leaders, and academic publications analysing regional developments. Triangular structures are classified according to the following criteria: the level of trust among actors; the institutionality and duration of partnerships; the foreign policy synchronisation of the triangle; the impact of bilateral relations on the triangle; and the potential for transformation. Using this method, the nature of the triangles, their stability levels, and Türkiye's position in relation to them are analytically revealed. The study focuses on the period between 2011 and 2024. The Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war marked a significant turning point in the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean. After this date, triangular structures changed in both form and function, and many actors redefined their positions. Therefore, the study treats this date as a turning point and examines actors' positions in the region within the strategic triangle, revealing Türkiye's place in this equation with respect to continuity and change.

THE TRANSACTIVE TRIANGLE AS A STABLE ALLIANCE STRUCTURE

The term 'transactive triangle' refers to a network of relationships in a geopolitical context, characterised by mutual, multifaceted and cooperative interactions between parties. In other words, the 'transactive' triangle is not merely a fixed, static alliance; it is dynamically shaped by diplomacy, military cooperation, economic and strategic moves, and mutual dependencies, with the parties in constant interaction. In this model, each corner of the triangle (e.g., the US-Israel-Greece-GCASC bloc) is not only allied with the others but also maintains active political, economic, and military relations. Furthermore, there are active mutual relations not only in military and diplomatic spheres but also in many other fields,

such as energy, trade, and intelligence sharing.¹⁰ This triangle is not only intertwined with global power balances but also carries global implications beyond its regional scope. In this context, the transactive triangle's maritime strategy is based on regional naval control, the security of energy transport routes, and deterrence. The United States maintains a permanent presence in the Eastern Mediterranean through bases in Dedeagach and Crete. At the same time, Israel has developed the capacity to project power far from its shores through advanced corvettes and submarines. Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus (GCASC) act as the logistical and geopolitical complements to this structure. One of the most important strategic objectives of this bloc is to transport Eastern Mediterranean energy resources to Europe.¹¹ NATO-compatible military capabilities and tripartite exercises (such as 'Noble Dina' and 'Iniochos') are the tools for implementing this strategy on the ground.

In this regard, the United States is emerging as a strategic actor promoting energy diversity in the Eastern Mediterranean, strengthening NATO alliance integrity, and guaranteeing Israel's security. Washington, which has established a permanent presence at bases such as Souda Bay (Crete), is providing rapid intervention capabilities to the region by converting these bases into carrier decks. In addition, with laws such as the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act, which came into force in 2019, and the American-Hellenic-Israeli Eastern Mediterranean Counterterrorism and Maritime Security Partnership Act of 2025, the United States has established a legal basis for security and energy cooperation with Greece, the GCASC and Israel.¹² The US's Eastern Mediterranean strategy aims to strengthen both energy security (the EastMed and Great Sea Interconnector projects) and deterrence in the sea-air-retaliation areas through this four-way structure. Greece, on the other hand, aims to modernise its military capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean and establish strong partnership networks in response to its long-standing geopolitical rivalry with Türkiye. The Patriot and S-300 systems deployed at the Souda base and along the Crete-Rhodes-Dodecanese line, as well as projects to develop Iron Dome-like systems with Israel, are strengthening its air defence capabilities. At the same

¹⁰ Lowell Dittmer, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Zenonas Tziarras, *Israel-Cyprus-Greece: A 'Comfortable' Quasi Alliance*, "Mediterranean Politics", Vol. 21, 2016, no. 3, pp. 410-421.

¹² U. S. Congress, *H.R.2510 - American-Hellenic-Israeli Eastern Mediterranean Counterterrorism and Maritime Security Partnership Act of 2025*, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/2510/text>.

time, efforts to integrate electricity within the Power Triangle – the Crete interconnector and the Great Sea Interconnector – are making Greece a central actor in energy transportation for both Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean.¹³ This strategic transformation is making Greece a balancing factor against Türkiye and a critical junction for regional energy corridors.

The GCASC, given its strategic location, actively participates in the deterrence efforts of the United States and Israel in the region. Following the partial lifting of the US arms embargo in 2020, it began replacing its Mi-35 and Tor-M1 systems with American-Israeli joint systems through its inclusion in the FMS and EDA programmes. In addition, through maritime-aviation and counter-terrorism training conducted at the CYCLOPS base as part of the 3+1 joint defence mechanism, the GCASC is being systematically integrated into the regional security architecture.¹⁴ This transformation is turning the GCASC into a central hub in U.S./Israeli operational plans, consistent with the definition of an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier.' Israel is building its Eastern Mediterranean strategy on securing regional energy resources, balancing Türkiye's military presence, and establishing energy export corridors to Europe. Tel Aviv, which leads the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) cooperation on gas extraction from the Tamar, Leviathan, and Aphrodite fields, is diversifying its energy exports via pipelines and undersea energy cables. Amid growing tensions with Türkiye, military cooperation with the GCASC and Greece is increasing Israel's strategic depth in the region.¹⁵

In light of these points, the United States, Israel, the GCASC, and Greece are taking essential steps toward maritime dominance by coordinating their naval forces in the Eastern Mediterranean. The United States' military bases and regular exercises in the region guarantee the security of sea lanes. The Israeli and Greek navies play a deterrent role against Türkiye's maritime activities in the area, with coordination being achieved through joint exercises, particularly in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean. The GCASC's navy is small but strategically important, providing information-sharing and logistical support during regional crises. These joint military preparations and exercises increase the capacity for rapid response to potential crises in the region and strengthen power projection.

¹³ Theodoros Tsakiris, *Greece and the Energy Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean*, LSE Ideas, Strategic Update 14.1, 2014, pp. 2-17.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Security Cooperation With the Republic of Cyprus*, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-republic-of-cyprus/>.

¹⁵ A. Murat AĞDEMİR, *Relations Between Israel and the South Cyprus Greek Administration: A New Alignment in the Eastern Mediterranean*, "Perceptions", Vol. 21, 2016, no. 2, pp. 103-126.

In light of these points, it is possible to say that the energy and security policies of the US, Israel, the GCASC, and the Greek bloc in the Eastern Mediterranean are interdependent and strategic.¹⁶ The EastMed Natural Gas Pipeline Agreement, signed by Israel, Greece, and the GCASC in 2020, is the most concrete step in this cooperation. The purpose of the pipeline is to supply energy to Europe by extending from the Leviathan field off the coast of Israel through the GCASC and Crete to Italy. The tripartite structure has also been reinforced by defence cooperation. The expansion of the U. S. Suda Base on the island of Crete, the lifting of the arms embargo on the GCASC (2020), and joint naval exercises with Israel have increased the military power of this triangle. Israel's joint training programmes at the Kalamata Air Base in Greece (2021) demonstrate the depth of the strategic rapprochement between the two countries.¹⁷

The relationships between the three actors, which have become institutionalised over time, are based on shared perceptions of threats and regional projects. The natural gas reserves discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean since the late 2000s have laid the foundation for economic and strategic rapprochement between the three actors. In this regard, the natural gas reserves of the Eastern Mediterranean are shaping the strategic interests of regional actors. Israel and the GCASC aim to export energy directly to Europe through the EastMed project. This project is considered part of Europe's strategy to increase energy diversity and reduce dependence on Russia.¹⁸ The US is working to strengthen the region's energy corridor by providing diplomatic and financial support for the project. Greece, as a critical country along the pipeline route, hosts the energy transmission infrastructure and contributes to the region's energy security. This energy cooperation creates a common counterbalance to Türkiye's continental shelf and exclusive economic zone (EEZ) claims in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁹

However, Israel, the GCASC, and Greece have held regular Tripartite

¹⁶ Mehmet Yegin, *United States Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean*, "Comparative Southeast European Studies", Vol. 70, 2022, no. 3, pp. 440-455.

¹⁷ Chapter Seven. *Greece: Regional Cooperation as Grand Strategy*, in Emile Hokayem, Rym Momtaz (Eds.), *Turbulence in the Eastern Mediterranean: Geopolitical, Security and Energy Dynamics*, "Strategic Dossiers", Vol. 2, 2024, no.1, pp. 156-169.

¹⁸ Theodoros Tsakiris, *The Importance of the East Mediterranean Gas for EU Energy Security: The Role of Cyprus, Israel and Egypt*, "The Cyprus Review", Vol. 30, 2018, no. 1, pp. 25-50.

¹⁹ Mehmet Efe Biresselioğlu, *Clashing Interests in the Eastern Mediterranean*, "Insight Turkey", Vol. 21, 2019, no. 4, pp. 115-134.

Summits since 2016. These summits have institutionalised multidimensional cooperation in areas such as energy security, cybersecurity, tourism, and water technologies. In addition, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) was established in Cairo in 2020, strengthening the regional legitimacy of this tripartite structure. Türkiye, however, has not been included in this forum. Based on this point, the US-Israel-GCASC-Greece axis stands out as a strategic bloc against the regional influence of Türkiye, Iran and Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean. The US military presence in the region is supported by bases and naval forces that cover a wide area from the Gulf to the Mediterranean.²⁰ Israel continues its policy of deterrence and active intervention against Iran's proxy forces in the region. The GCASC and Greece are strengthening their continental shelf disputes with Türkiye under international law, with support from the US and the EU. This cooperation plays a critical role in ensuring regional stability and establishing a balance of power.²¹

STABLE TRIANGLE AS A WEAKENING BLOCK

A stable triangle is a network of relationships characterised by mutual trust and continuous cooperation, grounded in long-term, consistent, and strategic objectives. The actors within the triangle are generally in agreement on strategic goals and shape their policies in line with long-term plans. The parties trust one another and establish robust mechanisms for cooperation and solidarity, thereby avoiding sudden, significant policy changes. The states forming the triangle share common goals such as maintaining regional power balances and showing solidarity against external threats. Cooperation in the military, economic, and diplomatic fields, and the capacity for joint action in the face of crises, are high.²² In the Eastern Mediterranean, the stable triangle of Russia, Iran, and Syria is based on port and coastal control, and on proxy forces rather than on naval power.²³ Russia has achieved its goal of gaining access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean through its permanent naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus. Together with Khmeimim Air

²⁰ Michael W. Pietrucha, *Essay: Building a Mediterranean Arc of Stability for America's Long War*, USNI News, December 1, 2015, <https://news.usni.org/2015/12/01/essay-building-a-mediterranean-arc-of-stability-for-americas-long-war>.

²¹ Sami Dogru, Herbert Reginbogen, *Rethinking East Mediterranean Security: Power, Allies & International Law*, "Touro Law Review", Vol. 33, 2017, no. 3, pp. 855-865.

²² Lowell Dittmer, *op. cit.*

²³ Clement Ndidi Oligie, *Why Russia Involved in the Syrian Civil War: One Issue, Many Views*, "Acta Universitatis Danubius. Relationes Internationales", Vol. 12, 2019, no.1, pp. 95-130.

Base, Tartus has become Moscow's primary platform for ensuring sea-air coordination. Iran, on the other hand, is seeking to establish a presence in the region not through its navy but through an asymmetric maritime strategy (militias, logistical lines, maritime connections via the Lebanese Hezbollah). The Syrian navy is virtually nonfunctional within this triangle, but the coastline serves as a corridor for the influence of Iran and Russia.²⁴ The Tartus Naval Base and Khmeimim Air Base in Syria primarily shape Russia's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Upon closer inspection, these three actors are developing complementary military, geopolitical, and energy-based strategies that both counterbalance the Western bloc and reinforce their permanent presence in the region. In line with its power-projection and balance-of-power strategy, Russia has identified the Eastern Mediterranean as a critical operational area within its 'far periphery' as it seeks to re-establish its global influence in the post-Cold War era. Moscow, which became a permanent presence in the region by directly intervening militarily in the Syrian Civil War in 2015, has transformed the Tartus naval base and the Khmeimim airbase into strategic assets through long-term agreements. These bases are central to Russia's A2/AD strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean: S-400 air defence systems, Kalibr-NK cruise missiles and electronic warfare elements prevent the US and NATO from operating freely in the region.²⁵ In addition to the military dimension, energy policies are also a cornerstone of Russia's strategy. By obtaining natural gas exploration licences in Syria's continental shelf through companies such as Rosneft and Novatek, Moscow aims to gain the potential to influence European energy security through these resources. At the same time, with pipeline projects such as TurkStream and Blue Stream running through Türkiye, Russia seeks to control the energy corridors centred on the Eastern Mediterranean and disrupt Europe's energy diversification efforts. All these moves demonstrate that Russia is strengthening its role as a regional balancing actor by complementing its military power with diplomatic and economic tools.²⁶

²⁴ Khadiga Arafa Mohammed, *Iran's Maritime Strategy and Perspectives Toward the Mediterranean Sea*, "Journal for Iranian Studies", Vol. 8, 2024, no. 20, pp. 49-58; Rod Thornton, *The Russian Military Presence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean: The Need for a Permanent Commitment*, "RUSI Journal", Vol. 163, 2018, no. 4, pp. 30-38.

²⁵ Militia Christi Pandelaki, Anak Agung Banyu Perwita, *Assessing Russia's Military Strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean Through the Establishment of an A2/AD (Anti Access/Anti Denial Zone)*, "Intermestic. Journal of International Studies", Vol. 5, 2021, no. 2, pp. 210-221.

²⁶ Richard A. Moss, *The Syrian Express and a Russian String of Pearls?* "Journal of Peace and War Studies", Vol. 5, 2023, pp. 108-119.

Syria, which is geographically key and a military hub, is not only a conflict zone in the Eastern Mediterranean strategy, but also the centre point of a three-way strategic alliance. In the process of regaining state authority after the civil war, Russia and Iran's support has been decisive for the regime. In particular, the allocation of military bases along the Latakia-Tartus line to Russia has made Syria the military anchor of this triangle. Syria's geopolitical position is of high strategic value to Russia and Iran due to its direct access to the sea, its proximity to Lebanon, its location on the border with Türkiye, and its position as a front line against Israel.²⁷ In terms of energy, although Syria lacks direct access to natural resources, it offers the potential to access offshore energy reserves. It serves as a corridor where regional energy routes intersect. For this reason, gas exploration activities off the Syrian coast are directly linked not only to economic considerations but also to sovereignty and security. The privileges granted by the regime to Russia in this regard have turned Syria into a 'geopolitical transit zone' rather than an 'energy-dependent' country.

Iran's strategy towards the Eastern Mediterranean is primarily based on the concept of the 'axis of resistance'. This axis extends from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to Hezbollah in Lebanon and has both ideological and strategic integrity. Iran uses this corridor to reach the Eastern Mediterranean, build deterrence against Israel, and deepen its influence in the region through its Shiite proxy forces.²⁸ Iran's military presence in Syria has been institutionalised through the Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force, creating a forward defence line for a possible direct conflict with Israel. Although tactical disagreements between Russia and Iran are occasionally observed, their strategic interests generally align. The comprehensive defence cooperation agreement²⁹ signed with Moscow in early 2025 demonstrates that the two actors share the goal of limiting American influence in the region. Iran has also become a regional trade partner for Russia in the face of Western sanctions, strengthening the Moscow-Tehran axis in the fields of energy, transportation and technology.³⁰ Thus, Iran serves as both a 'land

²⁷ Rod Thornton, *op. cit.*, p. 33-34.

²⁸ Khadiga Arafa Mohammed, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Vladimir I. Belov, Daniyal M. Ranjbar, *Iran and Russia on the Path to Building a Comprehensive, Principled Partnership*, "Information and Innovations", Vol. 19, 2024, no. 4, pp. 29-40.

³⁰ Rafał Czachor, *Ewolucja doktryny morskiej Federacji Rosyjskiej w latach 2001–2022. Ujęcie politologiczne* [The Evolution of the Naval Doctrine of the Russian Federation in 2001-2022. A Political Science Approach], "Studia Politologiczne", Vol. 74, 2024, pp. 286-303.

channel' that opens Russia to the Eastern Mediterranean and an 'asymmetric actor' in regional instability.

The Russia-Syria-Iran triangle offers a multi-layered, interest-based model of cooperation that differs from classic alliance structures. Each of the three actors pursues distinct priorities but coordinates their positions toward a common goal: limiting Western influence and establishing spheres of influence in the energy and security domains. This tripartite structure is complementary in many areas, including maritime security, energy policy, arms diplomacy, and logistical corridors. However, the structural differences between them and their sometimes-conflicting strategic agendas reveal that this triangle is as 'flexible' as it is 'stable'.³¹ From the perspective of Russia, Iran, and Syria, the existence of the Assad regime in Syria has been a fundamental element for Iran and Russia in terms of regional stability and the protection of their strategic interests. Iran has sought to increase its influence in the region by supporting the regime through Shiite militia forces, while Russia has ensured the regime's survival through military interventions. This joint support has created a strong bond and trust between the three countries and strengthened their resistance to regime change.³² This bond has influenced the regional balance by preserving the fundamental structure of the triangle since the beginning of the Syrian crisis.

Russia's air bases in Syria and the presence of Iranian-backed militias are concrete examples of the triangle's military cooperation. This partnership has both strengthened the Syrian regime's defence and enabled regional power projection. In the economic field, Iran and Russia have played essential roles in Syria's reconstruction and have established long-term economic ties through energy and infrastructure projects.³³ Thus, military and economic cooperation constituted the two main pillars supporting the triangle's sustainability. Iran and Russia regard Syria as a critical strategic area for limiting the influence of the US and the West in the Middle East and for increasing their own regional power. From this perspective, the actors of the triangle recognise the preservation of the Syrian regime as a prerequisite for achieving their geopolitical goals. These common goals have turned Syria into a geopolitical power centre, reinforcing the triangle's strategic cohesion

³¹ Rod Thornton, *op. cit.*; Clement Therme, *The Russian-Iran Partnership in a Multipolar World*, Russie.NEI.Reports, No. 37, IFRI, March 2022, pp. 10-22.

³² Tan Tan, Mariia German, *Russian-Iranian Strategic Partnership in Syria: Converging Interests but Diverging Goals*, "Open Journal of Political Science", Vol. 12, 2022, no. 12, pp. 2-10.

³³ Sinan Hatahet, *Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria*, Research Paper, Chatham House, March 2019, pp. 5-16.

and regional influence. Throughout the Syrian crisis, Iran, Russia and the Syrian regime have pursued joint diplomatic strategies in the international arena. At platforms such as the United Nations and the Astana process, the trio defended Syria's territorial integrity and adopted a coordinated position against foreign intervention.³⁴ This diplomatic cooperation has been practical in crisis management and has increased the triangle's role in regional stabilisation.

THE SEARCH FOR BALANCE, THE BREAKABLE TRIANGLE AND TÜRKİYE

The most prominent pillar of Türkiye's Eastern Mediterranean strategy is a defence architecture grounded in military deterrence and naval capacity. This approach, developed within the framework of the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine, aims to fortify Türkiye's maritime jurisdiction not only with legal arguments but also with naval forces on the ground. Accordingly, the Turkish Navy's permanent presence at sea has increased, and deterrence has been demonstrated through NAVTEX announcements, exercises (Mavi Vatan, Denizkurdu), and actual deployments in the Eastern Mediterranean. In this area, Türkiye has also made project-based naval modernisation, including amphibious ships such as the TCG Anadolu and indigenous weapon systems, an integral part of its strategy.³⁵ This military capacity is positioned not only for defence but also to ensure 'energy security' and counterbalance exclusion. Türkiye's Eastern Mediterranean strategy is also shaped to protect its right of access to the region's natural gas reserves and to have a say in the energy equation. The unilateral EEZ declarations of the GCASC, Greece, Israel, and Egypt, and the exclusion of Türkiye from projects such as EastMed, have led Ankara to develop a different interpretation of maritime jurisdiction under international law. This interpretation is that the continental shelf is mainland-based, and islands may constitute a limited maritime jurisdiction.³⁶ The 2019 Maritime Jurisdiction Delimitation Memorandum of Understanding signed with Libya³⁷ exemplifies this

³⁴ Juline Beaujouan, *Power Peace: The Resolution of the Syrian Conflict in a Post-Liberal Era of Peacemaking*, "Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding", Vol. 19, 2025, no. 3, pp. 310-326.

³⁵ Serkan Balkan, Murat Yeşiltaş, *From Geopolitical Anxiety to Assertive Stance: The Historical Construction and Transformation of Turkish Naval Strategy*, "Insight Turkey", Vol. 25, 2023, no. 3, pp. 134-138.

³⁶ Arda Özkan, *The EEZ Dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean*, "Mediterra. Mediterranean Social Studies Journal", Vol. 2, 2025, no. 1, pp. 30-43.

³⁷ UN, *Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Turkey*

approach in practice.

Moreover, Türkiye has been conducting energy exploration activities using ships such as *Oruç Reis*, *Barbaros Hayreddin Pasha*, and *Yavuz*, thereby participating in energy sharing in the Eastern Mediterranean as a 'de facto actor'. This shows that Türkiye approaches energy not only as an economic commodity but also as a geopolitical tool. In response to exclusion in the Eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye has pursued a balancing policy based on multilayered, alternative alliances in the diplomatic arena. Against the EU member states and the Greece-GCASC-centred axis, Türkiye has established bilateral and trilateral diplomatic configurations with partners such as Qatar and Libya.³⁸ The 2019 Libya Accord and Türkiye's military and economic cooperation with Qatar are part of Türkiye's efforts to enhance its legitimacy and influence in the region. In addition, Türkiye has been defending its positions on international platforms outside the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea; in particular, it has been reinterpreting the international law of the sea and articulating a position against the status quo. These diplomatic efforts are not only regional but also aimed at maintaining its position within NATO and creating bargaining space in relations with the EU over energy policies.

While the transactive triangle has been shaped by energy diplomacy, military cooperation, and security architectures in the Eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye has remained outside this structure. Greece and the GCASC's energy cooperation (such as the EastMed Project) and increasing defence coordination with Israel challenge Türkiye's maritime jurisdiction policies.³⁹ The post-2020 reorganisation of the US military presence in the region, through the GCASC and Greece, has led Türkiye to keep its distance from this triangle. By staying outside this triangle, Türkiye has developed its own geopolitical alternatives (e.g. the Türkiye-Libya agreement and defence cooperation with Qatar). At the same time, however, it has not completely severed its technical and diplomatic contacts with the US and Israel within the NATO framework and has occasionally assumed balancing roles. Therefore, Türkiye's relationship with the transactive triangle is characterised by a 'tense interaction' that includes pragmatic contacts despite its

and the Government of National Accord of the Libyan State on the Delimitation of Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean Sea, 2019, https://www.un.org/depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/TREATIES/Turkey_11122019_%28HC%29_Mou_Libya-Delimitation-areas-Mediterranean.pdf

³⁸ Galip Dalay, *Turkey, Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean: Charting a Way Out of the Current Deadlock*, Brookings Doha Center Policy Briefing, January 2021, pp. 2-10.

³⁹ Levent Kirval, Arda Özkan, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-109.

exclusionary nature. The transactive triangle formed by Israel, Greece and the GCASC in the Eastern Mediterranean has put natural gas resources at the centre of its energy diplomacy. In this framework, the EastMed project was brought to the agenda to transport Israeli gas to Europe via the GCASC and Greece, but Türkiye was excluded from the project.⁴⁰ These energy collaborations directly challenge Türkiye's economic and geopolitical interests in the region. In response, Türkiye raised the EastMed project's validity for discussion under international law through the 2019 Maritime Jurisdictional Areas Agreement with Libya. In addition, the activities of Turkish's seismic research and drilling vessels in the Eastern Mediterranean have been intensified, and de facto sovereignty has been tried to be created with NAVTEX announcements.⁴¹

The US lifting of the arms embargo on the GCASC (2020) and the increasing frequency of Israel-GCASC-Greece trilateral summits show that the transactive bloc in the Eastern Mediterranean has gained a political-military character. With its EU membership, the GCASC has also gained European political support. Türkiye has built a multilateral foreign policy in response to this diplomatic bloc. Especially since 2020, the normalisation of relations with countries such as Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia has been a diplomatic manoeuvre undertaken by Türkiye to counter perceptions of encirclement.⁴² In addition, Türkiye's efforts to strengthen its political arguments in the region through the TRNC are noteworthy. The US military presence in Crete and Alexandroupoli has also strengthened the Greek-GCASC-Israeli bloc militarily in the Eastern Mediterranean. Türkiye perceived this situation as a direct national security risk and implemented military deterrence measures. The Turkish Navy's exercises in line with the 'Blue Homeland' concept and the strengthening of the military presence in the TRNC should be evaluated within this framework.⁴³ Moreover, Türkiye's UCAV capability and the strengthening of its naval platforms have created a new centre

⁴⁰ Manfred Hafner, Pier Paolo Raimondi, Benedetta Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region and a Crossroad. Toward a Great Transformation?*, Springer Cham, 2023, pp. 300-315.

⁴¹ Ferhan Oral, *Is the Crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean: Is it About Energy or Sovereignty?*, "Journal of International Crisis and Political Research", Vol. 5, 2021, no. 1, pp. 224-240.

⁴² Şaban Kardaş, Bayram Sinkaya, *Evolution of Türkiye's Engagement in the Middle Eastern Regional Order: The Normalization Agenda and Beyond*, "Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies", Vol. 8, 2024, no. 3, pp. 497-527.

⁴³ Vitor Deccache Chiozzo, Andre Luiz Varella Neves, *The Blue Homeland (Mavi Vatan): Türkiye's Naval Strategy in the Surrounding Seas (2020-2023)*, "Revista da Escola de Guerra Naval", Vol. 30, 2024, no. 2, pp. 257-283.

of gravity in the military equation.

Although Türkiye cooperates with the stable bloc from time to time, it has profound contradictions with this trio, especially on the Syrian civil war and the future of the Assad regime. After 2011, Türkiye, which advocated the fall of the Assad regime, shaped its position on the ground by supporting the opposition groups, unlike Iran and Russia. However, in the process, it established temporary partnerships with Russia and Iran under diplomatic frameworks such as the Astana Process. These relations remain at the level of tactical co-operation, and conflicts of interest persist on the ground, particularly in regions such as Idlib, Tel Rifaat, and the eastern Euphrates. Türkiye's relations with this bloc are therefore unstable, non-strategic and mainly limited to short-term balancing acts.⁴⁴ The profound lack of trust and divergent long-term visions within the stable bloc make it difficult for Türkiye to secure a permanent foothold in this structure. The trio of Russia, Iran, and Syria does not act directly through energy projects but rather through geopolitical positioning to ensure energy security. In this context, Russia's presence at the Syrian ports of Tartus and Latakia provides strategic depth for energy logistics. Against this backdrop, Türkiye has diversified its energy routes through projects such as TANAP and TurkStream and has sought to reduce its dependence on Iranian gas.⁴⁵ At the same time, steps have been taken to become a direct energy producer with seismic exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Türkiye develops different foreign policy behaviours in the face of transactive and stable triangles. While complex balancing and direct challenge policies are pursued against the transactive triangle, more functional and conjunctural cooperation with the stable triangle is preferred. Between these two balances, the Qatar-Libya axis, which Türkiye has created, provides strategic manoeuvring space against these large triangles; however, it faces difficulties in resisting this pressure in the long term due to insufficient institutional infrastructure.⁴⁶ Due to these difficulties, the triangle in which Turkish naval strategy is at the centre is characterised by a 'fragile structure'. A fragile triangle

⁴⁴ Roza Habibi, Akbar Mahdizadeh, *Iran and Turkey: From Regional Competition to Trading Partnership*, "International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences", Vol. 24, 2024, pp. 26-30; Mustafa Aydin, *Transformation of Turkish-Russian Relations: Rivalry and Cooperation in Eurasia and the Levant*, "International Relations", Vol. 22, 2025, no. 85, pp. 22-36.

⁴⁵ Aliaksandr Novikau, Jahja Muhasilović, *Turkey's Quest to Become a Regional Energy Hub: Challenges and Opportunities*, "Heliyon", Vol. 9, 2023, no. 11, pp. 2-8.

⁴⁶ İlhan Uzgel, *Turkey and the Mediterranean Imbroglio: The Story of an Aspiring Regional Power*, Beirut, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Analysis, November 2020, pp. 3-10.

is a network of inter-actor relationships in which relations and co-operation, far from ensuring long-term stability, are under constant threat from external pressures, internal conflicts or regional dynamics, and may experience significant cracks from time to time. Trust between the parties diminishes, and co-operation is frequently tested and weakened by changing circumstances. At times, contradictions and competition between strategic objectives emerge in the partnership. Interventions by regional and global powers can upset the balance within the triangle. Domestic political problems, economic crises, or leadership changes in the countries that form the triangle increase its fragility.

Since the mid-2010s, Türkiye, Qatar and Libya have formed a new power centre in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa with their emerging partnership. This trio is positioned as a set of strategic actors that complement one another in economic, political, and military cooperation.⁴⁷ Türkiye and Qatar's strong political and diplomatic ties have been further strengthened by Qatar's support for Türkiye's regional projects, particularly since the Arab Spring. In Libya, Türkiye has become the concrete foundation of this regional triangle by supporting the Government of National Accord (GNA) militarily and politically. As Libya struggled with political instability and conflict after 2011, Türkiye's close relationship with the GNA heightened the risk of conflict with other regional actors (Egypt, the UAE, and France). The change of administrations in Libya, the dynamics of civil war and the risk of the country's fragmentation are the primary sources of the triangle's fragility.⁴⁸ The economic and diplomatic embargo imposed on Qatar in 2017 led to its regional isolation, one of the triangle's weakest links. Although this has made Türkiye-Qatar cooperation resilient, Qatar's confrontation with international pressure and regional tensions has fuelled the fragility of the triangle. Türkiye's active intervention in the region has led to criticism and sanctions from both Western and regional powers. The financial and political burden of the Libyan intervention, as well as disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, are among the factors that increase the fragility of the triangle.⁴⁹ The differing policies of global powers such as the US, France, and Russia toward

⁴⁷ Nesibe Hicret Battaloğlu, *Ideational Factors in Turkey's Alignment with Qatar and Their Impact on Regional Security*, "The International Spectator", Vol. 56, 2021, no. 4, pp. 101-118; İsmail Numan Telci, *Turkey's Libya Policy: Achievements and Challenges*, "Insight Turkey", Vol. 22, 2020, no. 4, pp. 41-53.

⁴⁸ Jean - Louis Romanet Perroux, *The Deep Roots of Libya's Security Fragmentation*, "Middle Eastern Studies", Vol. 55, 2019, no. 2, pp. 200-220.

⁴⁹ Buğra Süsler, *Turkey's Involvement in the Libyan Conflict, the Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean and Drone Warfare*, LSE Ideas. Strategic Update, August 2022, pp. 4-15.

Libya and Qatar challenge the stability of the triangle. The proxy war dynamics in Libya and Qatar's regional rivalry further deepen the triangle's fragile structure.

Türkiye is the most active actor, both militarily and diplomatically, within this fragile bloc. Military support provided to the Government of National Accord (GNA) and economic and political coordination with Qatar are indicators of Türkiye's efforts to expand its regional sphere of influence. However, this situation also brings along external pressure and internal conflict dynamics that increase fragility.⁵⁰ In this respect, the Türkiye-Qatar-Libya triangle is directly related to Türkiye's efforts to expand its maritime jurisdiction in the Eastern Mediterranean, which has attracted the reaction of other actors in the region (Greece, Egypt, UAE, Israel and GCASC). These actors are trying to maintain a regional balance against the triangle's activities, especially by supporting the Tobruk-based Haftar forces, which compete with the Türkiye-Qatar-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in the conflicts in Libya. This is one of the external pressures that increases the triangle's fragility. Libya's ongoing political fragmentation, civil war and interventions by external actors complicate Türkiye and Qatar's strategic presence in the region. The internal instability in Libya impedes the triangle's objectives and destabilises the regional balance. Therefore, developments in Libya are of vital importance for the continuity of the triangle. Türkiye's regional projects, particularly its efforts to expand its maritime jurisdiction in the Eastern Mediterranean and to influence energy corridors, may not fully align with Qatar's diplomatic stance in the Gulf and its position in Libya. Qatar's foreign policy in the Gulf crisis and its alliance with Türkiye sometimes challenge intra-triangular harmony.

CONCLUSIONS

Within the scope of this study, the Eastern Mediterranean was analysed in terms of its transactive and stable triangles, and Türkiye's position in the region was presented within the framework of a fragile triangle model that emerged from its efforts to balance these two triangles. Türkiye is not only seeking to balance the two large triangles in the current regional equation but also to create a central triangle around its own interests. However, this desire for centralisation does not appear to be sustainable given economic weakness and unestablished alliances. The

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-13; Zekiye Nazlı Kansu, *An Assessment of Eastern Mediterranean Maritime Boundary Delimitation Agreement Between Turkey and Libya*, "Kara Harp Okulu Bilim Dergisi", Vol. 30, 2020, no. 1, pp. 56-83.

expanding structure of the transactive triangle and the area's effectiveness within the stable triangle create an environment that condemns Türkiye to its fragile triangle. In this situation, Türkiye's foreign policy will either evolve towards multilateral integration by strengthening regional agreements or continue its isolationist tendencies, risking exclusion from the regional game. At this critical juncture, Türkiye's choices will determine not only its Eastern Mediterranean policy but also its overall foreign policy vision. Türkiye's relations with both the stable bloc and the transactive triangle are based not on a direct strategic partnership but on tactical balance and gaining ground. This situation indicates that Türkiye faces both the desire to develop independent mobility within the 'fragile triangle' and the risk of isolation in international relations. Relations with both blocs reveal the limits of Türkiye's quest for an autonomous foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. In this regard, Türkiye is developing different foreign policy behaviours towards the transactive and stable triangles. While pursuing policies of challenging balancing and confrontation towards the transactive triangle, Türkiye prefers more functional and conjunctural cooperation with the stable triangle.

Türkiye is seeking to balance the field against the US-led bloc through measures such as NAVTEX announcements, military exercises, and the EEZ agreement with Libya; on the other hand, it is establishing controlled relations with the Russia-Iran-Syria axis through counterterrorism, migration management, and temporary ceasefire mechanisms. Between these two balances, Türkiye's own Qatar-Libya axis provides strategic manoeuvring space against these large triangles; however, it lacks sufficient institutional infrastructure and therefore struggles to resist this pressure in the long term. A development that could exacerbate this difficulty is the regime change in Syria. The fall of the Assad regime would directly affect not only the stable triangle in the Eastern Mediterranean but also the fragile triangle that Türkiye is trying to shape. Firstly, the power vacuum that will emerge in Syria after Assad's departure could provide Türkiye with military and diplomatic room for manoeuvre, as its organic ties with opposition structures and border-security arguments have the potential to make Türkiye one of the central actors in the new equation. This situation could facilitate the spread of the military-diplomatic axis established with Libya to the Eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, Türkiye's coordination with actors such as Qatar, which adopted similar positions during the Arab Spring, could strengthen its regional position. However, despite this potential gain, the decline in Iran's influence in the event of Assad's overthrow could lead Gulf countries (especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia) to become more active in Syria, increasing the risk of conflict between Türkiye's regional influence and the new axes. The most significant dilemma of the fragile

triangle arises here: the competitive environment in post-Assad Syria could either strengthen Türkiye's fragile alliance with Qatar and Libya by expanding it to a broader region or leave it vulnerable to dissolving into indecisive alliances.

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