A New Axis in the Eastern Mediterranean

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(Costas Baltas - Anadolu Agency)

A new strategic alignment is taking shape in the Eastern Mediterranean. As turmoil spreads across the Middle East, Israel, Greece, and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus (GCASC) are turning what began largely as an energy partnership into a growing security relationship. When initially presented to the public, cooperation among this trio was packaged as "energy diplomacy," promoted through projects like the EastMed gas pipeline and regional economic integration, and framed as routine political and energy collaboration. However, concrete developments over time reveal that this rapprochement has moved far beyond a simple trade or energy partnership. It has evolved into a concrete strategic axis with distinct military, intelligence, spatial, and strategic dimensions, which risks becoming a threat to the region's stability and security.

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The deeper concern, therefore, is not simply the emergence of another regional partnership, but the security dilemma it has generated. Athens, Nicosia and Tel Aviv may portray closer military cooperation as defensive or stabilising. Yet, Ankara can reasonably interpret expanding intelligence networks, air-defence integration and military interoperability close to its strategic environment as menacing. Türkiye's resulting countermeasures can, in turn, reinforce Greek and Greek Cypriot threat perceptions and stimulate even deeper cooperation with Israel. The danger is thus a self-reinforcing cycle in which ostensibly defensive measures on each side progressively militarise the Eastern Mediterranean.

Military Co-operation Moving Beyond Routine Alignment

The most tangible output of this alliance, and one drawing sharp condemnation from regional stakeholders, particularly Ankara, is the operationalisation of joint military concepts that directly threaten regional stability and good-neighbourly relations.

The 10th Trilateral Summit Joint Declaration of 22 December 2025, signed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and GCASC President Nikos Christodoulides, explicitly embedded binding defence and security commitments. Concurrently, the Joint Action Plan (JAP) and bilateral Military Co-operation Programmes (MCP) signed in Nicosia formalised joint naval and aerial manoeuvres, combined Special Forces (SOF) training, intelligence sharing, and headquarters-level strategic consultations between the Greek and Israeli militaries.

Crucially, this architecture extends far beyond diplomatic rhetoric into a concrete operational footprint on the ground:

First, under a massive $1.68 billion defence agreement, the operation of Greece's International Flight Training Centre in Kalamata was handed over to Israel's Elbit Systems. This step effectively ensures that Greek Air Force pilots are trained under Israeli military doctrine and technology—a doctrine fundamentally anchored in perpetual threat perception and adversary identification.

Second, the Greek Cypriot phased decommissioning of its Russian-made Tor-M1 and BUK-M1 air defence systems in favour of Israeli Barak MX and Iron Dome technologies directly incorporates the south of the island into Israel's defence industrial complex. Coupled with large-scale military exercises across the Mediterranean and the Troodos Mountains, Israeli, Greek, and Greek Cypriot forces routinely practice complex hybrid warfare scenarios.

Finally, Greek and Greek Cypriot territory has begun functioning as vital "strategic depth" and a "safe haven" for Israel in anticipation of major regional escalation. Should Ben Gurion Airport or Haifa Port come under sustained missile threat, facilities such as Paphos Air Base, Larnaca Port, and Limassol have been designated as secondary hubs for supply, logistical transfer, and military evacuation. Furthermore, modernised radar and signals intelligence (SIGINT) stations across critical points like the Troodos Mountains now enable real-time monitoring and sharing of air and maritime traffic across the Levant and the Eastern Mediterranean.

While these developments may create a security umbrella among the trio, from a broader perspective, they are creating a policy that challenges regional dynamics.

The Silent Acquisition in Greek Cyprus

Beyond the military realm, this alliance encompasses a subtle yet significant demographic dimension—frequently characterised as an "asymmetric encroachment" or a "silent acquisition," driven by Israel-linked land purchases across the south of the island.

Initially framed by Greek Cypriot officials and the local media as routine foreign direct investment or tourism-driven real estate expansion, this phenomenon has increasingly taken on the contours of a deliberate strategic presence. The concentration, geographic placement, and institutional framework surrounding these acquisitions indicate a structural shift that directly impacts demographic balances and local sovereignty.

Across the strategic coastal corridor spanning Larnaca, Limassol, and Paphos—, as well as key rural interiors such as Trozena—, Israel-linked funds and private buyers have acquired thousands of parcels of land and residential properties. Rather than isolated real estate transactions, these purchases have increasingly consolidated into gated enclaves, private security-monitored developments, and village-scale land concentrations.

Official records indicate that between 2021 and January 2025 alone, Israeli nationals acquired 1,406 properties in Larnaca, 1,154 in Limassol, and 1,291 in Paphos. Broader estimates suggest that up to 15,000 Israeli citizens now hold property in the south. At the same time, transnational networks such as *Chabad* have helped establish synagogues, private schools, and community centres, creating a self-sustaining social and institutional infrastructure. When you consider the existing property-owning population alongside the influx of over 16,000 additional residents after October 2023, these developments are fostering an autonomous social fabric across the southern territory.

Strategically, this territorial and infrastructural consolidation provides Israel with critical strategic depth and forward-operating flexibility in the Eastern Mediterranean—assets that transcend mere civilian residency. By securing large swathes of land near pivotal maritime communication lines, commercial ports (notably Limassol and Larnaca), and vital transport corridors, these enclaves effectively serve as dual-use footholds. Operationally, they offer Tel Aviv a secure, proximate rear-guard logistics and evacuation hub that can sustain military and civil-defence contingencies during mainland escalations. Furthermore, these privately managed, self-contained compounds, often equipped with autonomous surveillance architecture and private security apparatuses, provide functional civilian cover for intelligence- gathering, signals monitoring, and maritime domain awareness across the Levant basin. In effect, the land acquisitions function not merely as real estate investments, but as an informal network of distributed forward-basing and logistics nodes embedded within the sovereign geography of Greek Cyprus.

Ultimately, rather than delivering the promised economic dividends of foreign investment, this expanding footprint generates a persistent sphere of influence for Israel within the Greek Cypriot community—; one that Nicosia may find increasingly difficult to manage or reverse.

An Unequal Partnership? The Risks of Asymmetric Interdependence

The relevant question is not whether the trilateral partnership produces benefits for all three parties. The more important question is whether those benefits—and the strategic risks accompanying them—are distributed evenly. Israel gains access to additional military infrastructure, logistical depth, intelligence cooperation and defence markets, while Athens and Nicosia acquire advanced military technologies, political backing and an additional source of deterrence. Yet, this relationship is structurally asymmetric. Israel possesses substantially greater military capabilities and strategic alternatives, giving it greater latitude to determine the extent of its commitments during a crisis. Greece and the Greek Cypriot administration, by contrast, risk becoming increasingly dependent on Israeli defence technology and more exposed to regional confrontations over which they have limited influence.

Israel's regional strategy rests on offering a perceived "security umbrella" through defence exports, joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and deepening industrial ties. Yet, as the *Jerusalem Post* noted, the vision of Greece's planned "Achilles Shield" air defence system is "modelled in some ways on Israel's integrated, multi-layered air defence concept"—a system that binds partners to Israeli technology and strategic logic rather than guaranteeing direct protection.

While fostering an expectation of intervention during crises, Israeli military doctrine is fundamentally oriented toward employing proxies, asymmetric methods, and fifth-column activities— rather than direct conflict —unless its own vital interests are at stake. As one analyst observed, Israel's strategy involves "proxy networks absorbing and redistributing the shock of retaliation across multiple fronts". The trilateral military cooperation signed in late 2025, described by Defence Publication *Al Defaiya* as prioritising "elite-level readiness and the exchange of expertise in 21st-century warfare," exemplifies this dynamic.

Rather than providing long-term security, these arrangements bind Greece and Greek-administered Cyprus to Tel Aviv's strategic choices and defence ecosystem—; a dependency that serves Israeli interests while offering its partners the appearance, rather than the reality, of a security guarantee.

The second pillar, basically a "carrot policy," which rests on energy diplomacy as a vehicle for political influence. Projects such as the EastMed gas pipeline, beset from the outset by formidable technical and commercial hurdles, were promoted with considerable fanfare, generating political symbolism that far outstripped their economic rationale. Washington's eventual withdrawal of support, a late act of realism, effectively administered the project its quietus. For Israel, these initiatives served primarily as diplomatic instruments, projecting energy leadership and consolidating regional legitimacy. When the momentum faltered, the attendant costs—diplomatic disappointment, financial exposure, and reputational damage—fell disproportionately on Athens and and the South Cyprus administration.

Furthermore, Israel expanded its operational domain beyond its mainland, securing vital strategic depth. By utilising Greek military infrastructure, airspace, and logistical access in southern Cyprus, Israel enhanced its contingency supply, deployment, and coordination capabilities. In return, Greece and Greek Cyprus have become increasingly entangled in Israel's regional rivalries, taking on risks that prioritise Tel Aviv's strategic interests over their own.

Within this asymmetric triad, the Greek Cypriot administration emerges as the most exposed and structurally vulnerable node. While Athens retains sovereign territorial depth, broader European mainland assets, and the institutional buffer of NATO membership, Nicosia possesses no such safeguards. Given its immediate geographic proximity to Middle Eastern flashpoints, limited conventional military deterrence, and small territorial scale, the island administration incurs disproportionate strategic liability. By heavily integrating Israeli sensor arrays, radar infrastructure, and multi-layered air defence architectures into its sovereign territory, southern Cyprus effectively becomes

Tel Aviv's forward-deployed operational outpost. In any regional escalation, this deep tactical entanglement renders the Greek Cypriot administration a prime, unbuffered target for retaliatory strikes and asymmetric countermeasures, bearing the ultimate frontline risks of Israel's regional confrontations without possessing the autonomous capability to absorb or deter them.

Consequently, the balance sheet remains uneven. While Israel has extended its security footprint, broadened its diplomatic manoeuvrability, and solidified its regional influence, Greece and Greek Cyprus have failed to secure a functional security umbrella. Instead, they find themselves positioned at the forefront of regional friction, bearing progressively higher strategic costs.

Ankara's Counter-Strategy: Awareness, Deterrence, and Multi-Dimensional Balance

While the motivations driving Israel, Greece, and the Greek Cypriot administration vary, their trilateral mechanism converges on a common denominator: expanding operational reach while creating a geopolitical counterweight to Türkiye. From Ankara's strategic perspective, this alignment is viewed primarily as an attempt to constrain Turkish operational freedom and legal claims across the Eastern Mediterranean basin.

Rather than viewing this alignment as an unforeseen crisis, Turkish policymakers frame the trilateral axis as part of an anticipated pattern of regional balancing. In response, Ankara has operationalised a multi-layered counter-strategy to prevent regional isolation and assert its own maritime vision. This strategic logic is largely anchored in the "Blue Homeland" (Mavi Vatan) doctrine, which Turkish planners utilise to justify a sustained naval and aerial footprint backed by an expanding domestic defence industrial base.

On the operational front, Ankara maintains this deterrence posture through dual-track mechanisms. The deployment of seismic research vessels - *Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa and Oruç Reis* - and drillships -*Fatih, Yavuz, Kanuni, and Abdülhamid Han*- under naval escort has served as Ankara's primary instrument for physically contesting overlapping maritime jurisdiction claims. Concurrently, Turkish military planners leverage the guarantor framework in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)—most visibly through the forward- deployment of UAV/UCAV assets at Geçitkale and regular joint patrol routines—as a key operational lever to offset trilateral air and naval cooperation in the Levant.

Beyond kinetic deterrence, Ankara's calculus relies heavily on legal-diplomatic manoeuvring to disrupt rival alignments. Turkish strategists point to the 2019 Maritime Delimitation Agreement with Libya as a foundational legal instrument designed to invalidate the geographic continuity underpinning initiatives like the EastMed pipeline. In parallel, Ankara seeks to dilute containment efforts by diversifying its regional partnerships, deepening energy coordination with Azerbaijan, leveraging the Organisation of Turkic States, and pursuing diplomatic normalisation with regional heavyweights such as Egypt. Similarly, diplomatic engagements, including high-level talks with Lebanese leadership regarding maritime boundaries, reflect Ankara's intent to engage prospective partners and prevent the consolidation of an unbroken rival maritime bloc.

Ultimately, Turkish strategic doctrine treats the Eastern Mediterranean not merely as an energy frontier, but as an existential security domain intrinsically linked to the status of the TRNC and the rights of the Turkish Cypriot community. Consequently, Ankara approaches the region under the calculation that unilateral security or energy frameworks are structurally unsustainable without Turkish accommodation. Through this combination of asymmetric military deterrence, legal contestation, and diplomatic recalibration, Ankara aims to retain a decisive veto over the regional order.

The more productive alternative is, therefore, the gradual development of an inclusive Eastern Mediterranean architecture in which competing states cooperate selectively on issues where interests overlap. Energy development, maritime security, trade, disaster response and regional connectivity all provide potential areas for such functional cooperation. This would not require Türkiye, Greece, Israel or the island's two communities to resolve every political dispute beforehand. Rather, it would seek to prevent unresolved disputes from hardening into permanent military blocs. In this sense, the strategic choice facing the Eastern Mediterranean is increasingly between competitive alignment and managed interdependence.

Conclusion: The Imperative of Rationality in the Eastern Mediterranean

For Athens and Nicosia, the expanding strategic alignment with Israel has offered short-term tactical advantages and high-profile diplomatic optics. Yet, tethering their long-term defence and energy calculus to Tel Aviv entails severe structural liabilities. This asymmetric relationship risks eroding their strategic autonomy, importing Middle Eastern escalation dynamics into European maritime space, and institutionalising regional polarisation. Ultimately, exclusionary blocs cannot provide enduring stability or unlock the basin's full commercial potential.

Moving beyond zero-sum dynamics requires transitioning from exclusionary trilateral alignments to a structured, institutionalised regional framework. To translate this principle into actionable policy, regional stakeholders should pursue a phased de-escalation and cooperation roadmap:

- **Establishing an Eastern Mediterranean Maritime Security Dialogue:** Launching an inclusive, multilateral forum—potentially convened under the auspices of the United Nations, or mediated through neutral third parties—to establish baseline rules of engagement, prevent maritime-air incidents, and facilitate direct communications between all coastal stakeholders, including Türkiye and the TRNC.
- **Implementing Energy & Infrastructure Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs):** Decoupling regional energy transit and offshore resources from broader sovereignty disputes. This could involve joint technical working groups, revenue-sharing models for hydrocarbon exploration around Cyprus, and establishing direct grid-interconnection feasibility studies that integrate Türkiye's established energy hub into Mediterranean routes.
- **A Dual-Track Deconfliction Mechanism:** Expanding existing NATO military deconfliction hotlines into an institutionalised regional monitoring mechanism aimed at depoliticising routine hydrographic surveys, cable-laying operations, and scientific research across contested maritime sectors.

In conclusion, lasting security in the Eastern Mediterranean will not be forged through menacing alliances or the deliberate isolation of primary coastal actors. True strategic rationality demands replacing unilateral deterrence axes with functional, multilateral mechanisms where sovereign interests, energy security, and equitable rights are negotiated rather than contested.