

At the Center of the Crossroads: A New U.S. Strategy for the East Med



JINSA Gemunder Center's Eastern Mediterranean Policy Project - November 2021
Co-Chairs: Ambassador Eric Edelman and General Charles Wald, USAF (ret.)



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Policy Project Members and Staff

Co-Chairs

.....

Amb. Eric Edelman

Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

Gen Charles "Chuck" Wald, USAF (ret.)

Former Deputy Commander of U.S. European Command

Members

.....

Gen Philip M. Breedlove, USAF (ret.)

Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander and former Commander of U.S. European Command

John Hannah

Former Assistant for National Security Affairs to the Vice President; JINSA Gemunder Center Senior Fellow

Gen Kevin P. Chilton, USAF (ret.)

Former Commander, U.S. Strategic Command

Reuben Jeffery

Former Under Secretary of State for Economic, Business and Agricultural Affairs

Svante E. Cornell

Policy Advisor, JINSA Gemunder Center for Defense & Strategy

Alan Makovsky

Former Senior Professional Staff Member at U.S. House Foreign Relations Committee

ADM Kirkland H. Donald, USN (ret.)

Former Director, Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program

GEN David Rodriguez, USA (ret.)

Former Commander, U.S. Africa Command

VADM Mark Fox, USN (ret.)

Former Deputy Commander, U.S. Central Command

Lt Gen Thomas "Tom" Trask, USAF (ret.)

Former Vice Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command

ADM Bill Gortney, USN (ret.)

Former Commander, North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD)

Gemunder Center Staff

.....

Michael Makovsky, PhD

President & CEO

Ari Cicurel

Senior Policy Analyst

Samuel Millner

Policy Analyst

Blaise Misztal

Vice President for Policy

Erielle Davidson

Senior Policy Analyst

Jonathan Ruhe

Director of Foreign Policy

Andrew Ghalili

Senior Policy Analyst

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I. Executive Summary

The Eastern Mediterranean sits at the geographic and geostrategic nexus of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. This “sea between the lands” has become a crucial maritime connector for expansionist forces – including Turkey, Iran, Russia, China, and Islamist jihadists seeking to exert power from one of the surrounding regions to the next. At the same time, the Eastern Mediterranean itself is becoming an object of competition, its recently discovered undersea natural gas resources rendering a rich prize for whoever can discover, develop, and export them. In the face of these strategic developments, U.S. partners from around the region and beyond are trying to create new security arrangements to address this growing competition and maintain stability.

Despite these geopolitical realignments and the Eastern Mediterranean’s growing salience, current U.S. capabilities in the region are insufficient either to defend its interests or to support regional partners. And, as policymakers in Washington focus on competing in the Indo-Pacific, nearby U.S. forces that could contribute to Eastern Mediterranean security from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East likely will be reallocated. To balance its growing interests in the region’s stability with the coming realignment of its global force posture, the United States should re-envision the Eastern Mediterranean as a strategic asset and a multi-theater power projection platform, from which a smaller contingent of U.S. forces can effectively and efficiently address threats not just in the immediate vicinity but in surrounding areas as well.

No actor has contributed more to the Eastern Mediterranean’s cauldron of competition and conflict than Turkey. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has radically altered the country from a reliable Western-aligned NATO ally into an increasingly nationalist, revisionist, interventionist, and pro-Islamist force that acts unpredictably and unilaterally. This includes Erdoğan’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates in Egypt, Gaza, Libya, and Syria; Turkey’s ground and air operations in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Nagorno-Karabakh; and Turkish ships repeatedly violating the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of neighboring countries and conducting naval harassment. In summer 2020, then-Mossad chief Yossi Cohen reportedly told his Egyptian, Saudi, and Emirati counterparts that “the real threat is from Turkey.”¹

Further complicating matters, multiple U.S. competitors from outside the region are joining the fray. Russia has secured direct access to the Mediterranean through permanent air and naval basing in Syria, and it has warm water access through its illegal annexation of Crimea. These bases as well as deployments of ground and air capabilities to Syria and Libya have enabled Russia to exacerbate existing conflicts and entrench itself in the region, potentially threatening the viability of U.S. and partner operations. Through the acquisition of ownership stakes and operating rights for ports and critical infrastructure astride major shipping lanes, China also is expanding its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean as a crucial link in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Though not a great power, Iran’s influence in the Mediterranean also is growing, through its support of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and its proxy Hezbollah, which dominates in Lebanon. Tehran seeks to establish a land bridge across Syria and Lebanon that would further facilitate the buildup of missiles and drones on Israeli and Jordanian borders and potentially create an anti-access area denial (A2/AD) network over portions of the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

At the same time, America’s partners are trying to cooperate against these threats. Political,

military, and economic relations among Israel, Greece, and Cyprus – and, to varying degrees, among those three states and Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia – have expanded significantly in response to Turkey’s increasing aggression. Some of the world’s largest hydrocarbon discoveries over the last decade have been found in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly undersea natural gas in the EEZs of Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel. These energy discoveries create opportunities for economic partnerships amongst these countries while also putting them at odds with Turkey, which takes an expansive view of its maritime and energy rights that totally discounts Greek and Cypriot territorial claims.

America’s current force posture is insufficient to address these challenges. U.S. military capabilities deployed to the region have failed to deter Russian, Turkish, Chinese, and Iranian actions. Most U.S. deployments to the Eastern Mediterranean are rotational, diminishing deterrence and creating potential delays when responding to crises. America relies on its forward-deployed presence in Souda Bay, on the strategic Greek island of Crete, for logistics operations and maritime stability in the Eastern Mediterranean; however, the U.S. Navy only permanently homeports one vessel there, a *Puller*-class expeditionary ship.

Next door, the strategic and operational value of America’s forward-deployed presence at Incirlik airbase in Turkey is uncertain. Increasingly, the United States cannot reliably expect to operate from the base, as Erdoğan has restricted U.S. access there at times – including in the early stages of the conflict against Islamic State. This raises the real prospect of future cutoffs and even a complete U.S. departure from the facility which, in turn, would diminish some of Turkey’s current leverage vis-à-vis the United States. Given tensions and conflicts around the Eastern Mediterranean and the potential for future crises, the United States requires a larger, permanent deployment of naval and aerial capabilities at Souda Bay that can transport troops and materiel within and between regions.

At the same time, U.S. capabilities in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East struggle to counter mounting threats in these theaters. The Biden administration has made renewed transatlantic ties a core objective to strengthen deterrence against Russia. Yet NATO still shows strains from doubts about U.S. commitments to mutual defense that worsened during the Trump administration. Presidents Trump and Biden sought to terminate what they called America’s “endless wars” in the Middle East, despite the relatively few U.S. troops engaged in combat and the effectiveness of these small deployments in bolstering partner forces. With diminished capabilities in the region, America’s adversaries – chiefly Iran and its proxies – already are ramping up their destabilizing attacks on U.S. service members, partners, and interests. Terrorist groups like Islamic State and al-Qaeda, with their potential to regenerate and develop new bases of operations, also threaten U.S. national security. Similarly, the United States has drawn down its force posture and consolidated its basing presence in sub-Saharan Africa and the Horn of Africa, putting logistical and operational strains on vital counterterrorism missions. Meanwhile, China’s increased military and economic presence in Africa creates potential intelligence concerns and threatens the future of U.S. partnerships. This also points to a larger problem: by concentrating on the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe in its strategic competition with China and Russia, respectively, the United States risks turning its back on the Eastern Mediterranean and neighboring theaters, thereby encouraging further great power inroads into these regions.

These drawdowns and uncertainties about America’s future roles and commitments create the potential for serious conflict that requires more concerted U.S. focus and presence in the

Eastern Mediterranean. Even as the Department of Defense (DOD) prepares to re-posture U.S. forces, it is imperative that it maintain the ability to address these growing challenges from great powers, Iran and terrorist groups alike.

Sitting at the confluence of three continents, the Eastern Mediterranean and its growing inter-regional relationships offer unique strategic opportunities, precisely at a time when the credibility of U.S. commitments has been undermined and its global force posture is stretched thin by competing demands across the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East, as well as by looming budget pressures at home. The Eastern Mediterranean's vital geostrategic location, along the frontiers of serious security challenges from the Indian Ocean through the Red Sea and Middle East to Eastern Europe, makes it an enticing platform for bolstering forward presence, projecting power into other theaters quickly and efficiently, and reassuring partners of America's willingness and ability to defend shared interests.

The United States can effectively address this vexing combination of growing threats and diminishing resources by modestly enhancing capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean and turning it into a multi-theater power projection platform. The Pentagon will need to broaden the strategic mission of America's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean to include bolstering capabilities in Europe, the Middle East, Red Sea, and Africa. Expanding Greek bases and U.S. presence there will provide the most strategic location to rapidly deploy ground, air, naval, and special forces assets required to address conflicts around the Eastern Mediterranean basin as well as in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The United States also should explore potential basing sites in Romania, Bulgaria, and Jordan.

America's buildup of capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean should coincide with expanded multilateral diplomatic and defense arrangements. Effectively shaping the changing dynamics to favor U.S. interests requires strengthening key partnerships with Israel, Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt, as well as NATO allies like France, Italy, and the United Kingdom who have built up their capabilities and operations in the region.

Because all the above efforts would reduce America's dependence on Turkey for regional access, Washington should provide Ankara with a clear choice. The United States will take steps to downgrade its military presence at Incirlik if Turkey continues its aggressive foreign policy, but by the same token the United States should engage Turkey about its integration into regional security arrangements if it fully cooperates with the United States against Islamic State and al-Qaeda, supports talks to end the Cyprus problem, makes serious efforts to resolve issues with Greece over the Aegean, and gives up its Russian S-400 air defense systems and pledges no further arms purchases from Moscow.

II. Introduction: A Geostrategic History of the East Med

Throughout recorded history, the Eastern Mediterranean has formed a geostrategic nexus between three continents. As part of the “sea between the lands,” its central location provides access to, and direct thoroughfares between, Europe, Asia, and Africa. To the north, the Aegean Sea serves as a gateway to and from southeastern Europe and the Black Sea littoral, including the Caucasus. The region’s eastern seaboard is part of the Middle East’s geographic core which extends to Iran and the energy-rich shores of the Persian Gulf. Via the Suez Canal, the Eastern Mediterranean also interlinks with the Red Sea and, through it, other strategically vital chokepoints at Bab el Mandeb, the entrance to the Persian Gulf at Hormuz; and across the Indian Ocean to the subcontinent, Malacca, and the Pacific. To the south, the region connects to the Sahel and Horn of Africa through Libya and Egypt. And the straits of Sicily and Gibraltar provide transit lanes ultimately reaching all the way to northern Europe and the U.S. homeland. At the heart of these crossroads, sitting in the center of the Eastern Mediterranean itself, are the divided island of Cyprus and the Greek island of Crete with its large deepwater port at Souda Bay.

For millennia, the region’s strategic importance made it a cockpit of competition drawing in empires and great powers both near and far. Therefore, it is fitting that, even as a fledgling nation in the late eighteenth century, the first real projection of U.S. military power abroad occurred in the Mediterranean to address the Barbary pirate threat to American shipping. This also is where the United States took its first steps as a global superpower at the dawn of the Cold War. Two American secretaries of state bookended the famous “Truman Doctrine” speech of 1947, which announced U.S. assistance to Greece and Turkey as part of a broader commitment to defend the free world, by emphasizing the Eastern Mediterranean’s close connections with broader U.S. strategic interests. Shortly before the president’s speech, George Marshall observed how, in Greece, “we are faced with the first crisis of a series which might extend Soviet domination to Europe, the Middle East and Asia.”² His successor, Dean Acheson, worried that “a highly possible Soviet breakthrough [in Greece] might open three continents to Soviet penetration...”³ The consequences of Soviet inroads in the region appeared so dire that then-chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Arthur Vandenburg, urged President Truman to “scare the hell out of the American people.”⁴

In succeeding years, the United States stood up the Sixth Fleet to maintain a permanent U.S. regional presence, while the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) created a dedicated military command for the region and expanded to include Greece and Turkey in 1952. Even with a regular Soviet military presence nearby, this helped the United States and its allies maintain strategic superiority in the region for decades; by the 1980s, Sixth Fleet regularly included two aircraft carriers, an amphibious ready group and plentiful support vessels. Accordingly, the Mediterranean was referred to as a “NATO lake” throughout much of the Cold War.⁵

Amid the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Moscow dissolved its Mediterranean fleet and withdrew forces from Syria and the Red Sea, Washington’s own regional force posture shrunk as part of a broader peace dividend, and its attentions shifted elsewhere.

In parallel with the U.S. Navy as a whole, the decades following the Cold War saw Sixth Fleet contract significantly to a single command ship in Italy, complimented by a mere four guided-missile destroyers (DDG) based in Rota on Spain's Atlantic coast plus an expeditionary sea base rotating through Souda Bay.⁶ Consequently, today the United States routinely deploys only 2-3 ships in the Eastern Mediterranean at any given time. Though such reduced force presence in the region may have sufficed for sustaining U.S. presence during the relative holiday from serious strategic threats of the early post-Cold War era, it currently is not reflective of heightening security competition.

This drawdown has been reflected in a clear desire by administrations from both parties to reduce – or at least significantly reorient – America's overseas involvement in general, and in the regions adjoining the Eastern Mediterranean in particular. On the campaign trail and in office, Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden variously called for cutting U.S. commitments and presence in the greater Middle East, Africa, Europe, and elsewhere. Key U.S. decisions like "leading from behind" in Libya; facilitating the fall of longtime U.S. ally President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2011; the lack of a quick reaction force in the Mediterranean to respond to the 2012 Benghazi consulate disaster; the 2013 failure to uphold the Syria redline; the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear program; the perceived absence of any U.S. response to Iran's 2019 attack on the Abqaiq energy facility in Saudi Arabia; President Trump's seeming eagerness to abandon America's Syrian Kurdish allies to their fate with Turkey in 2018 and again in 2019; and President Biden's ill-fated retreat from Afghanistan in 2021 – cumulatively, they have undermined the belief by friends and foes alike that the United States will maintain a reliable forward presence, support its allies, and help defend shared interests.

III. Sea Changes in the East Med

For key stretches of America’s unipolar era following the Cold War, the downsized U.S. role in the Eastern Mediterranean meshed conveniently with a unique period of relative quiet and stability in the region. Yet, as geopolitical tensions have rapidly reemerged there in recent years, the Eastern Mediterranean once again is becoming a cauldron of competition and conflict. These events are spurring significant strategic realignments which, given its vital location, bind the Eastern Mediterranean ever more closely with developments in neighboring theaters. Despite the increasingly important strategic implications for U.S. interests and regional stability, the United States largely has been on the outside looking in.

A. Catalysts of Regional Change

Three interrelated factors combine to raise the strategic stakes in the Eastern Mediterranean and lay the groundwork for its growing overlap with adjacent regions. First, it is home to some of the world’s largest hydrocarbon discoveries this century, primarily undersea natural gas in the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel. These countries, plus Greece and Turkey, continue to explore for additional finds. All except Turkey are weighing options to bring these supplies to market, including the costly and technically challenging EastMed undersea pipeline connecting Israel, Greece, and possibly Cyprus with Italy. In addition to the critical roles of American energy companies in discovering and developing many of these (and potentially future) reserves, such resources could directly support U.S. energy security objectives by reducing Europe’s dependence on Russian natural gas imports.

Second, Turkey has transformed profoundly under President Erdoğan from a reliable Western-aligned NATO bastion into a nationalist, revisionist, interventionist, and pro-Islamist force in the Eastern Mediterranean and farther afield. Overall, this increasingly unilateral foreign policy injects instability and raises the risks of regional conflict, even while occasionally overlapping with America’s own posture toward the region by balancing against Russia in certain theaters.

Under Erdoğan, Turkey serves as a base for the transnational Muslim Brotherhood and supports its affiliates in Egypt, Gaza, Libya, and Syria. Its successful use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) in combination with other military forces in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Nagorno-Karabakh has enabled Ankara to shape these conflicts and expand its influence. In Syria, Turkey has operated a combination of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and combat drones along the Syrian-Turkish border, as well as the Mediterranean and Aegean coasts, that have targeted Islamic State and U.S.-allied Syrian Kurdish positions. They also destroyed advancing Russian-backed Syrian forces and their Russian-made equipment as part of a combined ground, air, and artillery campaign in Idlib in early 2020.⁷ After initial setbacks, Turkish drones provided necessary ISR and air support, primarily against artillery and logistics convoys of Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) in 2020, enabling the rival ground forces of the internationally-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) to defend besieged Tripoli and wage successful attritional warfare against the LNA, which is backed by France, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as by Russian proxy forces.

Turkey also has been a conspicuous spoiler in the Eastern Mediterranean energy bonanza. This has helped drive closer relations among much of the rest of the region, even as Ankara's overt aggression there recently has subsided somewhat. Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel delineate their EEZ boundaries according to international law, based on the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). By contrast, Turkey posits expansive and contradictory territorial claims based on its continental shelf. In 2018-19, Ankara blatantly and repeatedly interfered with energy operations around Cyprus; in November 2019, in exchange for military support, Turkey secured a maritime boundary agreement from the GNA in Libya that was provocatively designed to legitimize such claims at the direct expense of Greece. Turkish military aircraft also regularly violate Greek airspace over the Aegean.

Though not originally his idea, Erdoğan has embraced the emerging ideology of a "blue homeland."⁸ This concept, which posits expansive Turkish claims across the Eastern Mediterranean and its shores, helps drive Turkey's naval antagonism not just toward Greece and Cyprus – much of whose EEZs Turkey claims for itself or its client statelet in northern Cyprus – but also now France and Italy, with Paris even suspending French involvement in NATO's Mediterranean operations in 2020 as a result.⁹ In March 2021 members of Erdoğan's AK Party extended Turkish provocations into Eastern Europe by musing publicly about withdrawing from the 1936 Montreux Convention which governs access to the Black Sea from the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁰ A major military buildup, including plans to launch 23 ships by 2023, undergirds these antagonistic Turkish ambitions.

Third, the Eastern Mediterranean has not been spared the return of great power competition that is becoming a central focus for U.S. grand strategy in general. Russia's annexation of Crimea enables it to operate out of Sevastopol, providing it a valuable warm water port commanding much of the Black Sea. Shortly after, and in the wake of the Obama administration's unenforced Syria redline, Russia stepped into the growing void of U.S. regional leadership to secure air and naval bases on Syria's Mediterranean coast, beginning in 2015. It has since installed advanced S-300 and S-400 air defenses at these bases, as well as anti-ship and cruise missiles whose ranges extend from Ramadi to Rhodes. These air defense systems also could threaten Israeli air operations against Iran's military entrenchment in Syria. Russia currently is expanding these bases into logistical and operational hubs for its forces around the region, which includes submarines, frigates, and corvettes equipped with Kalibr anti-ship cruise missiles that threaten NATO fleets.¹¹ By selling the S-400 to Turkey, Russia also has compounded strains within the transatlantic alliance stemming from Ankara's rising maritime aggression. Thanks to America's absence from Libya, Moscow also recently established a foothold there via its Wagner militia, opposite Turkey, in the process further encircling NATO's southeastern flank while also becoming a player in Libya's sizable onshore energy sector.¹²

China also has been busy in the region, as part of its larger competition with the United States for global leadership. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of growing political, economic, and military influence flows across Asia and Africa through vital trade arteries in the Red Sea and Eastern Mediterranean into the heart of Europe. Capitalizing on a lack of U.S. interest, its state-owned enterprises now own or operate key Italian, Greek, and Israeli ports – including Haifa, immediately adjacent to where Sixth Fleet ships once berthed regularly – as well as major investments in the Suez Canal and other critical infrastructure regionwide.¹³ Beijing's "17+1" initiative intends to connect the region more closely to Central and Eastern Europe through infrastructure and trade investments.¹⁴

Though not a great power per se, Iran's quest for Middle East predominance has brought it to the shores of the Mediterranean, too. Iranian ships ply Eastern Mediterranean waters to

support the client Assad regime, while its sectarian militias control much of what happens on the ground in Syria. Tehran’s brutal intervention in that country also featured strategic and operational coordination with Moscow, whose air force played the hammer to Iran’s anvil. Next door, Hezbollah gives Iran significant sway in Lebanon, and a beachhead from which its rockets, missiles, and maritime capabilities pose acute threats not only to Israel, but also shipping and energy infrastructure offshore. These gains reflect Tehran’s larger project to establish a “land bridge” with permanent ground, naval, and air presences in Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean Sea, which threatens Israel, Jordan, U.S. forces in the region, and even the Suez Canal. Indeed, Iran’s deployment and proliferation of advanced surface-to-surface and anti-ship missiles already presents anti-access area denial (A2/AD) challenges that endanger the ability of the Sixth Fleet to freely operate in the Eastern Mediterranean. It also echoes Iran’s strategy of harassing and attacking U.S. naval vessels, partner-nation ships, and commercial shipping vessels in the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, and (via its Houthi proxy) Bab el Mandeb.

B. Major Strategic Realignment

What happens in the Eastern Mediterranean certainly does not stay there, given its intrinsically vital location astride three continents. Increasingly, the region’s changing geopolitics and heightening security competition intertwine with the rivalries and conflicts surrounding it in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa, and even the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, all of the above factors – energy, Turkey, and great power competition in the vacuum of U.S. leadership – combine to drive these regional security systems more closely together.

Though the seeds of change germinated over time, a logical starting point is Erdoğan’s decision to host Khaled Meshal, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Hamas, in Ankara in 2006.¹⁵ Coming after decades of fairly strong ties with the Jewish state, this set in train a shift in Turkish policy away from Israel that culminated in the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* flotilla to Gaza and subsequent incidents which effectively froze relations, including ending longstanding bilateral military cooperation. Ankara’s growing rapport with Hamas also presaged broader support for the Brotherhood amid the political upheavals in the Arab world beginning later that year. This immersed Turkey more deeply into Middle Eastern politics not only by aligning it with Qatar, but also by alienating more moderate regimes in Saudi Arabia and UAE, as well as in Egypt after the fall of Cairo’s Brotherhood government in 2013. It also contributed to Emirati involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean through its growing support for anti-Brotherhood factions in Libya.

Just over a year before the Gaza flotilla, Israel announced the region’s first big offshore natural gas find, followed by Cyprus in 2010 and Egypt in 2015. The ensuing regionwide resource scramble aggravated Turkey’s ties with Greece and Cyprus, given Ankara’s aggressive maritime claims. These rising tensions made Athens and Nicosia appealing diplomatic, economic, and security partners for Jerusalem and Cairo, culminating in Greco-Cypriot “trilateral” partnerships with Egypt and Israel starting in 2014 and 2016, respectively.¹⁶ With U.S. participation in its March 2019 foreign ministerial summit, the latter took on a “3+1” format pledging to “defend against external malign influences in the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader Middle East.”¹⁷ (The Biden administration has endorsed this 3+1 format, though it has yet to participate in a ministerial meeting.) Since 2019 these trilaterals have formed the basis for an evolving “arc of stability” stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean through the Persian Gulf to the subcontinent as Saudi Arabia, UAE, and India also have begun forging closer diplomatic and defense ties with Greece, Cyprus, and Israel.

Before and during these developments, Turkey expanded its influence in vital transit lanes and chokepoints around the Red Sea and Horn of Africa.

Beginning with Erdoğan’s Mogadishu visit in 2011, Ankara built close ties to Somalia and Sudan with support from Qatar’s ample coffers. By 2015, UAE and other Gulf states, with Egyptian support, had responded by establishing economic and military outposts in Eritrea, Somaliland, and elsewhere nearby, thereby extending their growing rivalry with Turkey into an additional theater and tying it more deeply into Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern disputes.¹⁸ This fissure deepened in 2017 when Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, Djibouti, Eritrea, parts of Somalia, and others blockaded Qatar over the latter’s ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran, among other issues.¹⁹ The opposing factions in Libya’s civil war split neatly along this divide as the Brotherhood-aligned GNA sided with Qatar while the UAE- and Egypt-backed LNA supported the blockade. One effect of the standoff was to link Gulf security issues more closely with those in the Eastern Mediterranean: Turkey responded by establishing a major military base outside Doha, while Qatar undertook a massive defense buildup and agreed to station dozens of new military aircraft in Turkey.²⁰

These developments all occurred during, and have been encouraged by, the U.S. drawdown from its traditional role as the primary external actor in the Red Sea littoral. According to a 2020 U.S. Institute of Peace report, due to a combination of these trends “the Horn of Africa is now an integral part of, and in fact the link among, the security systems of the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific and the Mediterranean... As in the eastern Mediterranean, the export of Middle Eastern rivalries into the Horn – the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt contesting Turkey and Qatar for dominance – is fueling instability and insecurity....”²¹ Moreover, the spread of terrorist groups, including Islamic State, from the Middle East and Red Sea to the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa further ties these regions together.

Flush with sanctions relief and a clear-eyed appreciation of Washington’s unwillingness to confront it, in the wake of the JCPOA nuclear deal Tehran expanded its Middle East military footprint; simultaneously, its support for the Houthis in Yemen made it a seriously disruptive force in the greater Red Sea region. In 2019, Iran’s military posture around the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean became even more menacing as it began retaliating for renewed U.S. sanctions with attacks on shipping and energy targets. These increasingly shared threats of Iranian encirclement – amplified by uncertainty about America’s commitment to the broader region and rising Turkish trans-regional provocations – helped motivate Israel, Bahrain, and UAE to seal the Abraham Accords in August 2020.

Those historic agreements lie at the heart of a strategic interweaving among the Eastern Mediterranean and neighboring regions that has accelerated in recent years. Since Ankara’s aggressive EEZ deal with Tripoli in late 2019, Greece and Cyprus have followed and even gone beyond Israel’s example in strengthening cooperation with the Gulf. This concerns chiefly security ties with Saudi Arabia and UAE, as well as Jordan – all designed to counter both Turkey and Iran.²² France has been bolstering defense cooperation with Greece, Cyprus, and Gulf countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, where French energy companies are active and which guards passage to French bases in Djibouti and UAE. In September 2021 Paris and Athens finalized a bilateral defense agreement – including an “Article 5”-type mutual pledge of assistance in case of attack – which built on recent sales of French fighter aircraft and frigates to Greece.²³

Entering into force in March 2021, the EastMed Gas Forum’s (EMGF) official charter brought together Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority (PA) to coordinate formally on regional energy security issues. Turkey conspicuously was omitted, while UAE’s membership bid fell short due only to a PA veto in retaliation for the Abraham Accords.

In July 2021 the Eastern Mediterranean security system expanded even farther, into South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, as Greece, UAE, and India announced they would establish a third “trilateral” forum for strategic cooperation. That same month, New Delhi participated in naval exercises in Greek waters.²⁴ Even the ongoing Israel-Iran “shadow war” features back-and-forth attacks on shipping across the Eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean.

The return of great power competition to the Eastern Mediterranean further entwines the region intimately with security challenges in neighboring arenas, and in the wider world. Russia’s ability to project power into Syria, Libya, and the Red Sea, where it is exploring a basing agreement with Sudan, flows literally from the Black Sea, and from which some of its ships can strike targets in the Eastern Mediterranean.²⁵ These footholds on the Mediterranean thereby also offer Moscow forward-deployed “defense barriers” and strategic depth that protect its southwestern flank in Eastern Europe and integrate its air defense umbrella in Syria with similar systems positioned around the Black Sea littoral.²⁶ Despite their S-400 deal, Moscow’s rivalry with Ankara increasingly extends into Eastern Europe as well, where Ukraine and Poland are buying Turkish-made UAVs that have taken such tolls on Russian military equipment in Syrian, Libyan, and Caucasian battlefields in the past two years alone.²⁷

Russia’s Navy also uses the Black Sea for joint exercises with China, whose own ability to protect its growing interests in the Eastern Mediterranean derives from its only overseas military base, in Djibouti adjacent both to the critical Bab el Mandeb chokepoint and a major U.S. military installation. In addition to enabling a growing Chinese naval presence in the western Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden, this in turn ties Beijing’s Eastern Mediterranean and Red Sea presences directly to its so-called “string of pearls” – a series of ports covering its sea lines of communication across the Arabian Peninsula and northern Indian Ocean to the Indo-Pacific.

Human geography further interconnects the Eastern Mediterranean with its neighbors. The region has witnessed mass migrations throughout history, including in recent years as refugee exoduses from the Middle East and Sahel cross through Turkey and Libya en route to Greece, Italy, and the rest of the European Union. This binds the Eastern Mediterranean, and through it much of Europe, to the political, economic, and security problems of bordering regions stretching all the way to sub-Saharan Africa and Afghanistan.

IV. America's Insufficient East Med Force Posture

American forces in the Eastern Mediterranean rely heavily on Souda Bay in Greece, which currently operates near capacity, to sustain forward presence and an ability to respond to crises.²⁸ Located on the Greek island of Crete, United States Naval Support Activity (NSA) Souda Bay functions as a Naval Operating Base, Naval Air Station, and Naval Weapons Station supporting joint U.S. Navy and Air Force reconnaissance missions and other joint multinational operations. The deepwater port is one of the few locations in the Eastern Mediterranean capable of permanently basing an aircraft carrier. The nearby NATO Missile Firing Installation is the only location in Europe capable of test-firing missiles; it also has the capacity to host U.S. Marine battalions. According to the comptroller of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the FY2022 defense budget request allocates funding at Souda Bay “needed for constructing a joint mobility processing center with an air passenger terminal, air cargo terminal, supply operations and air operations spaces with ‘ready-to-use’ detachment contingency spaces.”²⁹

While combat naval and air assets rotate through Souda Bay, America’s permanent capabilities at the port are primarily logistical. In October 2020, the troop-carrying *Puller*-class expeditionary ship USS Hershel “Woody” Williams changed its homeport from Norfolk, Virginia, to Souda Bay, marking the first time in 40 years that a U.S. ship homeports at this shared U.S.-Greece base.³⁰ The ship has a crew of 240 personnel and functions as a platform for large logistics transportation, such as transferring troops, equipment, and vehicles.

The U.S.-Greece mutual defense cooperation agreement (MDCA), which was amended last month to increase U.S. access to Greek bases, offers a platform to strengthen U.S. force posture in the region and boost America’s ability to project power around the Eastern Mediterranean and neighboring theaters. Indeed, the newly-restructured MDCA, which now is set to remain in force indefinitely after previously being year-to-year, reflects both countries’ strong interests in an expanded and more sustained U.S. presence in Greece.³¹

At the same time, U.S. deterrent and power projection capabilities at Incirlik airbase are made uncertain by Turkey’s increasingly aggressive and unreliable foreign policy, which routinely threatens to deny U.S. access according to Erdogan’s wishes. For instance, during Islamic State’s 2014 offensive through Syria and Iraq, Turkey initially denied the United States or its Syrian Kurdish allies transit through its territory. Ankara also refused initially to allow U.S. forces to use the air base for operations against Islamic State, even for search and rescue missions. In 2017, Germany withdrew its forces from Incirlik after Turkey refused its lawmakers access to the base in retaliation for a law declaring the 1915 murder of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire to be a genocide.³²

For all these reasons, America’s deployments in the Eastern Mediterranean currently are insufficient to address growing challenges within the region. The lack of permanently deployed naval and air assets could diminish America’s deterrence and create delays when responding to crises, and the single *Puller*-class expeditionary ship at Souda Bay cannot redeploy sufficient assets during an emergency in the Eastern Mediterranean. The United States also lacks a permanent manned and unmanned naval presence, including naval-based air defenses; such a deployment might have the positive benefit, inter alia, of discouraging Turkey’s provocative harassment of peaceful energy exploration and other destabilizing activities.

V. Challenges to Increased East Med Force Posture in Surrounding Regions

The Biden administration is reviewing U.S. global military force posture that likely will draw down forces from regions surrounding the Eastern Mediterranean. Similar to its predecessor, the Biden White House believes China poses the leading national security challenge, which demands a larger military footprint in the Indo-Pacific. According to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, “there’s no question that we need a more resilient and distributed force posture in the Indo-Pacific in response to China’s counter-intervention capabilities and approaches, supported by new operational concepts.”³⁴ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley has also argued that “China is increasing its military capability at a very serious and sustained rate. We must ensure that we retain our competitive and technological edge against this pacing threat.”³⁵ Or, as an International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) report by Euan Graham argues, “tilting the centre of gravity for US naval operations from the Gulf to the South China Sea would be one visible way to substantiate claims of prioritization for the largely maritime Indo-Pacific region.”³⁶

This rebalancing is likely to involve further troop redeployments and base consolidations in the Middle East and Africa that creates too small a footprint in each of these regions, which in turn compounds the importance of adequate U.S. force posture in the Eastern Mediterranean at the nexus of Europe, the Middle East, the Red Sea, and Africa.

It is less clear how the DOD’s ongoing global posture review will shape the Eastern Mediterranean and Eastern Europe. During his confirmation hearing, Secretary Austin argued that “U.S. and NATO force posture in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean regions is key in deterring Russian aggression. Just as Russia’s strategic goals in these regions are not static, U.S. and NATO force posture must be regularly re-assessed to ensure it is making the intended impacts. If confirmed, I will ensure our force posture is reviewed, updated, and improved as needed.”³⁷ Whether this means the deployment of additional forces and capabilities remains to be seen.

A. Europe

U.S. capabilities in Europe are critical to deterring Russian aggression. America’s relationship with its NATO allies became strained as the Trump administration instilled doubt in America’s commitment to mutual defense and threatened to redeploy U.S. forces out of the continent. The Biden administration has sought to revitalize the transatlantic partnership and strengthen deterrence of Russia in Eastern Europe, but it remains to be seen how the global posture review will affect U.S. capabilities in the region.

On July 29, 2020, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper announced that roughly 11,900 military personnel would be withdrawn from Germany, with less than half repositioned elsewhere in Europe.³⁸ The plan emphasized dynamic rotational force deployment as a more sustainable alternative to permanent deployments, for example the 4,500 U.S. rotational troops stationed in Poland after Russia’s 2014 invasions of Crimea and Donbas.³⁹ Romania and Poland each host the two Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense systems as part of the U.S. contribution to NATO missile defense in Europe. While the Navy has expressed interest in divesting itself of operating ground-based systems like Aegis Ashore,

the fact that no other service has committed to taking on the responsibility injects uncertainty into future U.S. commitments to Eastern Europe and raises the importance of nearby Eastern Mediterranean-based capabilities.⁴⁰

In April 2021, Secretary Austin announced he had stopped planning for large-scale troop reductions previously ordered by President Trump, and in fact would expand the U.S. military presence in Germany.⁴¹ Meanwhile, Russia continues to amass strength along NATO's eastern front. It has deployed long-range, land-based anti-air and anti-ship systems, such as the highly mobile and survivable S-400 and Bastion-P coastal defense cruise missile systems to try to dominate the entire Black Sea. Russia's buildup in Crimea provides it with security in its immediate vicinity and a means of projecting power further afield into the Eastern Mediterranean.

B. Middle East

The size of America's military presence in the Middle East has decreased during the Trump and Biden presidencies. Both decried what they termed America's "endless wars" there, which in recent years have involved relatively few U.S. troops engaging in combat operations. America's diminished capabilities in the Middle East leave breathing room for adversaries to operate more freely and endanger regional stability.

In 2019, President Trump redeployed U.S. troops away from the Turkish border in northern Syria, abandoning a productive partnership with Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) there and allowing Turkey and Russia to occupy the territory.⁴² Likewise, the Biden administration has repeatedly removed air defense assets from the region, including those protecting Saudi Arabia.⁴³ However, these withdrawals have coincided with Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria rapidly escalating their ballistic missile, rocket, and drone attacks on U.S. service members, interests, and partners.⁴⁴ Recently, U.S. Fifth Fleet stood up a new Task Force 59 that will put more unmanned systems "out in the maritime domain above, on and below the sea," according to its commander Vice Admiral Brad Cooper.⁴⁵ This initiative intends to enhance U.S. capabilities by improving ISR capabilities in the maritime domain and strengthening deterrence against Iran. The task force could provide a model for conducting unmanned operations not only in the Middle East but also in other regions, such as the Eastern Mediterranean, given Turkey's growing drone usage.

Meanwhile, terrorist groups like Islamic State and al-Qaeda continue to operate throughout the region and threaten to attack inside and outside the Middle East. Despite losing its caliphate, Islamic State could reconstitute control of territory unless it faces persistent pressure. However, the U.S. withdrawal from northern Syria also decreased counterterrorism capabilities. According to the Pentagon's inspector general, Islamic State "exploited the Turkish incursion and subsequent drawdown of U.S. troops to reconstitute capabilities and resources within Syria and strengthen its ability to plan attacks abroad."

Already, Iran is filling the Middle East vacuum from America's regional drawdown. Tehran and its well-armed proxies target shipping in the Eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Persian Gulf. The IRGC Navy (IRGCN) and Iranian-backed groups have repeatedly targeted vessels affiliated with the United States, Israel, Arab states, or other nations with dangerous limpet mines, missile and drone attacks, and illegal seizures of ships, cargo, and crew members in violation of international law.⁴⁷ Iranian-backed groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have escalated their attacks this year as part of a strategy to raise costs and eventually push America out of the region.

In parallel, Russia has filled other U.S. voids by bolstering its strategic depth and making itself a powerbroker in Syria and Libya, whose pivotal locations allow Moscow the flexibility to project power both in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. Finally, and perhaps ironically, as the United States pulls focus from the region and pivots its attention to Indo-Pacific, China could become more strategically active in the Middle East through its steadily increasing BRI interests, including a long-term strategic cooperation agreement with Tehran signed earlier this year.⁴⁸ Indeed, Iran, Russia, and China are steadily improving defense ties among themselves, with the three countries scheduled to conduct joint exercises in 2021 or early 2022.

C. Africa

The early 2000s saw an escalation of U.S. efforts to counter Islamist extremism, especially in the Horn of Africa. Counterterrorism operations in Africa include Operation Enduring Freedom-Horn of Africa (OEF-HOA), a military mission which commenced in October 2002 to combat militant Islamism as well as piracy.

The United States currently operates several bases in Africa primarily focused on counterterrorism operations. Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby has argued that “the terror threat from al-Qaida has metastasized out of Afghanistan to other places, including Africa [...] the United States will maintain its robust counterterrorism partnerships there.”⁴⁹ Djibouti hosts Camp Lemonnier, the only permanent U.S. military base in Africa and the home of the Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA).⁵⁰ Camp Lemonnier functions as the regional hub of aerial operations in the Gulf, and it is the primary U.S. drone and surveillance base in Africa. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) operates MQ-9 Reaper drones in Niger out of the capital Niamey and Agadez. The CIA also operates a large drone base in Niger from which it has launched surveillance and reconnaissance counterterrorism missions in Niger, Mali, and Chad.

In December 2020, for reasons never completely made clear, President Trump ordered the small contingent of 700 U.S. troops in Somalia to relocate to Kenya or Djibouti.⁵¹ U.S. troops had been training and supporting Somali forces in counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabab. Since withdrawing, American troops have been “commuting to work” by flying into Somalia for short-term operations and then leaving the country, according to commander of U.S. Africa Command Army Gen. Stephen J. Townsend.⁵² Basing outside of Somalia puts logistical and operational strain on U.S. forces and decreases the time that U.S. troops can operate on the ground.

Further straining U.S. operations, China constructed its first overseas base just seven miles away from Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. The close presence of Chinese military assets raises significant risks for espionage and debt-trap diplomacy in a country critical to America’s counterterrorism operations in Africa.⁵³ America’s ability to conduct counterterrorism operations in Africa would be undercut severely if Beijing gained significant economic or political influence over Djibouti through the BRI.

There is also a significant jihadist threat in the Sahel. Armed groups there have attacked military convoys, bridges, and government buildings and are pushing south to the Ivory Coast, Benin, Togo, and Ghana, which hosts an AFRICOM logistics hub. According to Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl, “security continues to deteriorate in the Sahel as instability spreads and threatens coastal West Africa,” and “we cannot ignore that persistent conflict in Africa will continue to generate threats to U.S. personnel, partners, and interests from violent extremist organizations.”⁵⁴

VI. U.S. Policy Recommendations

These remarkable changes in the Eastern Mediterranean raise the risk of serious conflict and require more concerted U.S. focus and presence. But the region, and its growing inter-regional ties, also offer unique strategic opportunities, precisely at a time when the credibility of U.S. commitments has been undermined and its global force posture is stretched thin by competing demands across the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East, as well as by looming budget pressure at home. It is imperative that America maintain the ability to address threats in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, even as DOD prepares to re-posture forces abroad.

Simultaneously, American partners are shouldering greater burdens of collective defense, and are doing so trans-regionally. Using the Eastern Mediterranean as a strategic springboard, therefore, also enables the United States to harness and deepen historic realignments and build multilateral frameworks that bind the region more closely with surrounding environs.

At a time of growing U.S. strategic parsimony and acutely competing priorities both domestic and foreign, there are several complementary lines of effort American policymakers should undertake to leverage the Eastern Mediterranean's advantageous geography and geopolitics.

A. Strategic Reframing of the Eastern Mediterranean for Multi-Theater Power Projection

The Eastern Mediterranean's vital position, along the frontiers of growing security challenges from the Indian Ocean through the Red Sea and Middle East to Eastern Europe, make the region an enticing platform for bolstering America's forward presence and projecting power into these neighboring theaters quickly and efficiently. In turn, this will reassure allies of America's willingness and ability to defend shared interests. The Eastern Mediterranean also presents an ideal centralized location to maintain rapidly deployable surge capacity.

Committing additional assets to the Eastern Mediterranean could mitigate the problematic effects of rebalancing U.S. capabilities in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Doing so requires broadening America's primarily Europe-focused strategic mission in the Eastern Mediterranean to reflect the lighter U.S. footprint in the Middle East and Africa. Turning America's posture in the Eastern Mediterranean into a multi-theater power projection platform would enable a modest force to maintain U.S. presence both within the region and nearby. From a few strategic locations in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly Greek bases, the United States could rotate or rapidly deploy ground, air, and naval assets as required to the Mediterranean, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Successfully building the Eastern Mediterranean into a multi-theater power projection will require:

- A Pentagon assessment of diminished U.S. capabilities based on drawdowns of forces outlined in the Biden administration's ongoing global posture review. Congress should require DOD to issue a risk assessment accompanying the global posture review that explains how the United States will mitigate threats in theaters where there is a drawdown in capabilities. This report should include how the Pentagon could expand capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean to transform it into a multi-theater power projection platform.

- Coordination among offices within the National Security Council, Department of Defense, and State Department that are responsible for the Eastern Mediterranean, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa to provide strategic guidance and develop a force posture within the Eastern Mediterranean that optimally addresses threats there and bolsters capabilities in nearby regions.
- Logistical operations for the rapid transportation of forces forward-deployed in the Eastern Mediterranean, which falls mainly within EUCOM's area of responsibility (AOR), to the AORs of U.S. Central and Africa Commands. Given existing U.S. sealift and airlift shortfalls more globally, Congress should require DOD to issue a report explaining its plan to fulfill the 2018 National Defense Strategy's requirement for dynamic force deployment and a global operating model.

B. Expand Force Posture and Capabilities In and Around the East Med

The United States should expand its force posture and capabilities to address growing threats in, around, and beyond the Eastern Mediterranean. With likely drawdowns in nearby theaters, U.S. force posture should address threats in the Middle East and Africa by:

- Forward-deploying additional air wings in Greece.
- Redeploying at least two guided-missile destroyers (DDG) from Rota, Spain, to ports in Greece, in order to cut down on transit time and provide more regular and visible U.S. force presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.
- Enhancing U.S. rotational deployments, including U.S. Army, Air Force, special operations, and Coast Guard units, through additional, often underutilized Greek military installations, including but not limited to Alexandroupolis and airbases at Larissa and Stefanovikeio.
- Deploying additional expeditionary and sealift capable ships to Souda Bay that can redeploy forces and materiel within the Eastern Mediterranean and adjacent regions.
- Integrating Greek and other partner naval forces with U.S. carrier groups deployed in the Sixth Fleet.
- Forward-deploying rapid reaction capabilities, including a Marine expeditionary brigade, that can respond to terrorist, hostage-taking, and piracy incidents on land and at sea.
- Rotating or homeporting vessels capable of conducting patrol and escort operations and deploying helicopters, including DDGs, littoral combat ships (LCS), amphibious command ships (LCC), cruisers (CG), and dock landing ships (LSD).
- Creating an unmanned systems task force for Sixth Fleet, similar to Fifth Fleet's Task Force 59, that can build out America's ISR network and integrate with existing manned platforms, as well as patrol alongside commercial shipping.
- Positioning radar and air defense systems to cover Greece and Cyprus, such as Aegis Ashore.

C. Integrate with Multilateral Frameworks

In tandem, deeper U.S. diplomatic and defense engagement is needed with many evolving multilateral frameworks. While anchored in the Eastern Mediterranean, these coalitions also affect the security architectures of neighboring theaters. The United States should coordinate with regional partners, such as Israel, Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt, as well as capable allies already operating in the Eastern Mediterranean like the United Kingdom and France. Several steps the United States should take include:

- Building on the initial “3+1” model, engaging more persistently and formally with “trilaterals” encompassing Greece and Cyprus that are variously grouped with Israel, Egypt, UAE, and India. American officials also should promote greater cooperation among the members of these separate trilaterals, and coordinate them more closely with similar diplomatic frameworks in the Indo-Pacific
- Regularizing and expanding multilateral military exercises with these countries as well as France, Italy, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and possibly NATO Black Sea allies Bulgaria and Romania to bolster readiness for 1) counterterrorism operations, 2) strategic competition against China, Russia, and Iran, and 3) maintaining freedom of navigation and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean.
- Building on the recent extension of the one-year waiver of the U.S. arms embargo, considering steps to strengthen U.S. security ties with Cyprus to safeguard regional energy exploration, including in blocs currently leased by Cyprus to U.S. and other companies. Such steps, which until December 2019 were largely blocked by the embargo, also offer opportunities to strengthen regional defense cooperation with France, whose growing force presence in the Eastern Mediterranean includes a new port in Cyprus.
- Based on provisions initially spelled out by Congress in 2019, legislation enacting sustained and predictable amounts of U.S. foreign military financing (FMF), military education and training (IMET) and excess defense articles (EDA) for Greece, which will help Athens grow its complementary role to Washington as a regional security provider.
- Over the longer term, integrating into these diplomatic and defense structures a Turkey that is anti-terrorist, shorn of Russian armaments, and engaged in serious efforts to resolve its Aegean problems with Greece as well as the Cyprus problem.

D. Expand Basing in Greece

If the Eastern Mediterranean is the crossroads of three continents, then Greece perhaps is the nexus of this nexus, offering unique opportunities for enhanced U.S. presence both there and farther afield. Athens is an eager U.S. partner whose commitment to force modernization and a greater strategic role in support of U.S. and key NATO interests makes it stand out among America’s allies and partners.⁵⁶ Greek naval and air basing provides the most strategic location for the United States to build up its capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean. It also offers alternatives should a collapse in U.S.-Turkish relations lead the United States to withdraw assets from Turkey – a possibility for which the United States urgently needs to develop contingency plans.

Souda Bay provides the region’s best harbor for U.S. aircraft carriers and other large warships. It is also the epicenter of major maritime arteries providing direct access to the Bosphorus and Black Sea, southeast to the Suez Canal, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean, and west to the Straits of Sicily and ultimately the Atlantic. Sitting on the doorstep of Libya, Souda Bay provides a counterpoise to the lingering (and illegitimate) Turkish and Russian military presences in that country; it also lies athwart Moscow’s avenues for projecting power into Syria from Eastern Europe. Likewise, the port of Alexandroupolis, currently being upgraded with U.S. and Greek investment, is ideally positioned to become a primary hub for surging NATO forces into southeastern Europe and the Black Sea to counter Russia.

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