

Understanding the Complexities of the Eastern Mediterranean Hydrocarbon Puzzle by Regional Security Complex Theory

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Abstract

The discovered hydrocarbon reserves throughout the Eastern Mediterranean hold enormous economic promise but have also increased regional geopolitical tensions. However, the discovery of reserves has failed to advance regional cooperation in the region due to pre-existing territorial conflicts and closed security alliances. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) helps this study understand how security connections in the area determine energy politics by explaining the failure of economic benefits to transcend historical conflicts. This research shows that the securitization process of hydrocarbon resources created new conflicts that generated maritime military disputes and formed special alliances. The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum demonstrates how security issues supplant economic advantages since it excludes Türkiye from membership, thereby impeding the creation of an all-encompassing regional energy framework. The research adds value to existing knowledge about energy governance by underscoring the influence of state and non-state forces in the region's energy sector. According to the analysis, energy diplomacy cannot solve geopolitical conflicts because security concerns need broader political structures for resolution. The Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon resources will continue to be a source of regional dispute if no comprehensive solutions are implemented.

Keywords: Eastern Mediterranean, Geopolitics, Securitization, Energy, Diplomacy

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Introduction

The recent conflict between Russia and Ukraine has propelled energy security to the forefront of the global agenda, particularly due to the Russian Federation's utilization of energy as a geopolitical tool (Tichý and Dubský 2024). This development has raised substantial apprehension among European Union (EU) member states. While there is a pronounced emphasis on transitioning to renewable energy within the EU, the diversification of energy sources and an increased reliance on natural gas represent additional strategic objectives

(Panarello and Gatto 2023). Against this backdrop, the Eastern Mediterranean region has assumed heightened significance as a potential solution to Europe's energy requirements. Although the gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean may not be of sufficient scale to fundamentally reshape the global energy landscape, they can fulfill the energy needs of the producing nations and facilitate gas exports to other countries (Ruble 2017: 341-353). Given the considerable expense associated with energy investments, collaborative efforts among relevant states become imperative for mutual benefit. Furthermore, hydrocarbons may be a constructive element in conflict resolution within the region.

Deriving from these remarks, this article examines the energy landscape in the Eastern Mediterranean, focusing on the opportunities and the economic and political challenges that have impeded regional cooperation over the years. The discovery of gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has led to optimism regarding the potential transformative impact of the region's hydrocarbon resources on its geopolitical dynamics, which have historically been characterized by conflict and political discord (Raimondi 2023). The execution of gas agreements has strengthened diplomatic ties among certain countries and facilitated substantial economic advantages. The dynamics of the region's energy relations are studied within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). RSCT is the guiding framework, enabling a structured analysis of how geographic proximity and overlapping security interests shape state behavior.

This study employs a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis to explore the Eastern Mediterranean's energy disputes and regional security dynamics. Using secondary data allows for a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge, drawing from scholarly literature, policy reports, and international legal frameworks to build a robust foundation for analysis. These sources were chosen to capture various perspectives and ensure the analysis is grounded in well-established research.

The article focuses on patterns of securitization and desecuritization and the formation of amity-enmity dynamics within the regional security complex. The study critically examines how energy disputes, particularly over hydrocarbon resources and exclusive economic zones (EEZs), are securitized by regional actors such as Türkiye, Greece, and Republic of Cyprus (RoC). By applying RSCT, the analysis links these security dynamics to broader structural patterns, providing a deeper understanding of the interplay between regional and global influences (Dokos 2012: 505-517).

Energy Security in the Eastern Mediterranean and Regional Security Complex Theory

The Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon discoveries have attracted considerable academic attention, with various theoretical frameworks employed to understand the region's complex dynamics. This section critically examines key contributions by some authors who have explored the interplay of energy resources, regional security, and governance. Still, it highlights gaps in understanding the full potential of RSCT to frame these challenges. This study seeks

to demonstrate how RSCT offers a nuanced and comprehensive lens for analyzing the region's energy disputes and security dynamics by addressing these gaps.

İşeri (2019) combines RSCT and securitization theory to analyze how hydrocarbon discoveries have intensified, rather than mitigated, conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean. His study examines Türkiye's securitization of energy resources within RoC's EEZ, which he attributes to the region's overlapping security complexes regarding European and Middle Eastern regions. İşeri (2019: 258-259) critiques the idea that energy can serve as a "peace pipeline", pointing out that the geopolitical sensitivities surrounding EEZ demarcations, pipeline routes, and maritime rights have deepened enmity among regional actors. While İşeri provides a strong foundation for understanding energy securitization, his application of RSCT is confined to Türkiye's policies and their immediate impact. The study does not explore RSCT's capacity to address broader regional dynamics, such as the prospects for desecuritization or the potential for energy to foster interdependence. This research builds on İşeri's work by expanding the scope of RSCT to include the wider regional system and analyzing how its framework can explain pathways for both conflict and cooperation.

Rubin and Eiran (2019) approach the Eastern Mediterranean from the perspective of maritime security, focusing on the fragmented nature of governance in the region. Their work highlights a paradox: despite clear incentives for cooperation, such as mutual benefits from hydrocarbon exports and the need for shared environmental regulation, regional actors predominantly pursue unilateral policies. These include naval armament, competing EEZ claims, and bilateral alignments, which exacerbate tensions rather than mitigate them. The authors argue that the lack of a shared security culture and protracted conflicts, such as those between Türkiye, Greece, and RoC, undermine cooperative efforts (Rubin and Eiran 2019). While insightful, their study does not provide a robust theoretical framework to explain why regional fragmentation persists despite clear economic incentives. This study seeks to fill this gap by utilizing RSCT to link the region's security dynamics with energy disputes. It provides a deeper understanding of the structural and relational factors driving fragmentation.

Goldthau et al. (2024) introduce the concept of "energization", emphasizing the transformative role of energy in regionalization processes. Unlike traditional securitization theories, which view energy as a source of conflict between states, the authors argue that energy resources act as a governance object, bringing together various actors, including governments, energy companies, and regulators. These actors contribute to creating new governance structures and networks, which they term "energization". Their critique of RSCT as overly state-centric is significant, as they highlight the agency of non-state actors and the role of global governance frameworks such as the EU energy regime and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). However, their emphasis on non-state dynamics risks underestimating the persistent influence of traditional security considerations, such as territorial disputes and naval confrontations, which remain central to the Eastern Mediterranean (Goldthau et al. 2024). This research integrates their insights into a broader RSCT framework, addressing how state and non-state actors jointly shape the region's security and governance landscape.

The research by Şahin and Sözen (2023) investigated the changing dynamics between Russia and Turkey by studying their foreign policy development through security cooperation and securitization mechanisms. Through applying the RSCT from the Copenhagen School, the research showed that NATO members and EU member states jointly aligned their strategies because of comparable security concerns toward Western actors. The authors studied securitization and de-securitization patterns by analyzing political speeches combined with official discourses and media reports. Bilateral cooperation between Turkey and Russia grew stronger after Turkey adopted new policies that departed from NATO's framework. At the same time, Russia demonstrated increasing power in the former Soviet states, particularly through its joint initiatives in the energy and defense sectors. Turkey faced ongoing diplomatic disputes because of its defense obligations and regional conflicts in Syria, along with the Eastern Mediterranean. According to the authors, further research about the effects of these relationships on regional protection should be prioritized (Şahin and Sözen 2023). The research faced its main drawback because it depended on secondary sources that might have missed current diplomatic changes.

Badarin and Schumacher (2022) researched Eastern Mediterranean energy disputes by examining their global geopolitical context. The research incorporated geopolitical thinking that evaluated concrete components such as EEZs while analyzing the non-Americentric approaches to international politics. The authors applied geopolitical analysis alongside policy review to show that while global powers like the United States (US), Russia, and China displayed minimal direct involvement in Eastern Mediterranean gas reserves, the European Union held significant influence because it acted as a crucial buyer. Research data indicated that new energy discoveries triggered escalations between Greece and Turkey, which they used to enhance their regional influence. The authors proposed that the EU use its market position to promote stability in the Eastern Mediterranean region (Badarin and Schumacher 2022). The main weakness of this research was its narrow focus on geopolitical aspects instead of economic viability, since it needed additional analysis to study energy project financial feasibility.

Dangubić (2024) used the RSCT to study how hydrocarbon discoveries influenced Eastern Mediterranean stability. The research used qualitative state behavior analysis, official statements, and policy changes to understand that hydrocarbon discoveries increased already tensed geopolitical conditions instead of promoting collaborative efforts. Energy resources intensified historical rivalries between RoC, Greece, Turkey, and Israel by serving as both causes of new alliances and violent conflicts. Strategic interests motivated global powers to intervene, including the US, Russia, and China, yet these powers did not engage in direct resource competition. This research indicated that stable regional relationships and international legal systems needed diplomatic talks. The research faced a limitation because it failed to consider financial elements affecting oil extraction and trade activities that might affect upcoming political choices.

This research builds on these works by employing RSCT as a unifying analytical framework to examine the Eastern Mediterranean's energy disputes and regional security

dynamics. Integrating insights from securitization and energization theories aims to bridge the gap between state-centric and non-state perspectives by demonstrating how RSCT accommodates both dimensions. Then clarify the drivers of fragmentation in regional governance by linking security dynamics to energy politics. This research then proposes pathways for cooperation by identifying mechanisms through which RSCT can explain desecuritization and regional integration.

Regional Security Complex Theory is a framework Barry Buzan and Ole Waever established to analyze security dynamics within a particular region. This theory examines the dimensions of security interdependence among nations, encompassing both threats and the corresponding solutions (Buzan and Waever 2003). It provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the interplay of security dynamics in regions where interconnected threats and rivalries define political interactions. Unlike realism, which focuses narrowly on power balances and assumes that states act rationally to maximize security or influence, RSCT delves deeper into the relational and regional dimensions of security. It recognizes that threats and responses are not isolated but are shaped by proximity and historical patterns of interaction. Similarly, liberal theories emphasize economic interdependence and the potential for cooperation. Yet, they struggle to explain why shared economic incentives, such as those presented by Eastern Mediterranean gas discoveries, have not mitigated geopolitical rivalries. Constructivist approaches, on the other hand, focus on shared identities, norms, and discourses, providing valuable insights into how perceptions shape interactions (İşeri 2019: 19-32). However, these approaches often lack the structural focus needed to explain enduring patterns of conflict driven by geography and power asymmetries. RSCT bridges these limitations by integrating structural and relational dynamics, particularly suited to regions like the Eastern Mediterranean, where historical rivalries, economic interests, and regional geopolitics intersect.

The Eastern Mediterranean presents a uniquely complex security environment shaped by overlapping regional security complexes, historical enmities, and competing visions for energy governance. RSCT's emphasis on geographically coherent clusters of security interdependence allows it to capture the interconnectedness of actors and threats in this region (Buzan 2003). For instance, the region serves as a meeting point for the European and Middle Eastern security complexes, with Türkiye acting as an insulator at their intersection. This dual positioning creates unique pressures on Türkiye's foreign and security policies, driving its aggressive stance on hydrocarbon exploration in contested waters and its challenges to the RoC's EEZ claims (İşeri and Bartan 2019). RSCT also provides a framework for understanding the emergence of cooperative but exclusionary alignments, such as the Israel-RoC-Greece trilateral partnership, which was formed to balance Turkish influence in the region (Tziarras 2016: 407-427).

Another aspect of the region's complexity lies in the interplay between regional actors and external powers, including the US, the EU, and Russia. RSCT explains how these external powers influence the dynamics of the Eastern Mediterranean by reinforcing existing security patterns or introducing new tensions. For example, the EU's energy diversification strategy has elevated the importance of Eastern Mediterranean gas, further entrenching divisions between

EU member states like Greece and RoC and non-member states like Türkiye (Bastin 2021: 483-489). The theory's flexibility in addressing intra-regional dynamics and external actors' influence underscores its suitability for analyzing the Eastern Mediterranean.

The utility of RSCT becomes particularly clear when applied to specific cases in the Eastern Mediterranean. Türkiye's role as an insulator state exemplifies how overlapping security dynamics shape national strategies and behavior. At the crossroads of the European, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian security complexes, Türkiye's actions in the Eastern Mediterranean reflect its broader strategic concerns. For instance, Türkiye's deployment of naval forces to accompany its drilling ships in RoC's EEZ illustrates how energy resources have become securitized in Turkish policy. This securitization stems from economic considerations and perceived existential threats to Türkiye's regional influence and sovereignty (Rubin and Eiran 2019: 979-998). The Israel-RoC-Greece trilateral alliance has consolidated around shared energy interests and mutual opposition to Turkish claims. This alliance reflects RSCT's concept of amity-enmity patterns, where energy cooperation fosters alignment among some states while simultaneously deepening divisions with others. The construction of the Eastern Mediterranean (EastMed) pipeline, intended to transport gas to Europe, highlights how energy projects are embedded within broader security dynamics, reinforcing alliances while exacerbating regional fragmentation (Çubukçuoğlu 2021: 13-22).

Furthermore, RSCT explains why regional cooperation remains limited despite significant economic incentives (Yacoob 2003). The discovery of major gas fields such as Leviathan and Aphrodite has not led to the establishment of an inclusive regional energy framework but has intensified existing rivalries (Aydın and Dizdaroğlu: 89-103). The failure to integrate Türkiye into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) exemplifies how regional security patterns—shaped by historical conflicts and competing national interests—override the logic of economic interdependence. By situating these dynamics within a broader framework of regional security interdependence, RSCT reveals the underlying forces that perpetuate fragmentation.

RSCT's ability to incorporate regional security's structural, relational, and historical dimensions makes it uniquely equipped to analyze the Eastern Mediterranean. Unlike realist theories, which reduce interactions to power dynamics, RSCT accounts for the complex interplay of geography, historical rivalries, and overlapping security concerns. Its emphasis on the securitization of issues, such as energy resources, provides a nuanced understanding of how economic assets become enmeshed in national security agendas (Buzan 2003). Moreover, RSCT's focus on conflict and cooperation allows it to identify potential pathways for desecuritization and regional integration, offering valuable insights for policymakers and scholars alike (Stergiou 2023: 604-625). By integrating examples such as Türkiye's securitization of energy exploration and the formation of the regional energy alliance, RSCT demonstrates its capacity to explain both the drivers of conflict and the barriers to cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Its multi-dimensional approach transcends the limitations of alternative frameworks, making it the most effective tool for understanding the region's intricate security dynamics.

Gas Discoveries and Energy Trends in the Eastern Mediterranean

The Eastern Mediterranean has garnered heightened global attention following significant gas discoveries in recent years. Identifying the Leviathan gas field in 2010 and the subsequent discovery of the Aphrodite gas field in 2011 sparked inquiries into the region's potential for gas export and the requisite infrastructure for such endeavors (Khaddiri 2012: 111-117). However, despite these developments, the Eastern Mediterranean does not possess the proven gas reserves requisite to establish itself as a major gas-producing region. Notably, the Zohr gas field in Egypt has emerged as a key player in the regional gas production landscape, enabling substantial exports to the EU. In contrast, the Leviathan and Aphrodite fields, the two largest gas reservoirs in the region, are estimated to hold 620bcm and 130bcm of gas reserves, respectively (Winrow 2016: 431-447). This suggests that while the Eastern Mediterranean has made noteworthy strides in gas exploration, it may not yet possess the substantial resource base necessary to rival other established gas-producing regions (Köylü 2021: 43-48).

The escalation of offshore plans in the Eastern Mediterranean has increased the disputes among states regarding territorial waters. With the discoveries in both Israel and the RoC, it became evident that opportunities for collaboration in the region had emerged. Following the initial discovery, Israel assumed a leadership role in instituting the requisite export channels and infrastructures essential for the commercialization of Levantine gas resources (Tsakiris 2014: 19-20). With the commencement of production at the Aphrodite gas field, the RoC is poised to assume more obvious roles within the regional energy landscape, which includes facilitating the transportation of Israeli and Cypriot gas to the European energy markets. The EU, aiming to promote diversification in gas supply, concomitantly alleviates RoC's energy isolation and contributes to the island's economic advancement. Despite the influence of external factors such as the US and Russia on the geopolitical and security dynamics, the EU encounters limitations in shaping regional energy policy. For Instance, where business realities and national preferences deviate from EU policy objectives, the Union's capacity to implement substantial projects becomes constrained (Tziarras 2016: 407-427).

In 2011 and 2012, Israel, RoC, and Greece formed a joint working group to assess the viability of some potential energy cooperation projects. Among these was laying a pipeline to move Israeli and Cypriot gas to European markets via Greece and constructing a joint Israeli-Cypriot Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) plant (Tziampiris 2015: 136). Furthermore, other projects were also assessed simultaneously, considering each country's energy and security agendas and economic interests. Among these are the construction of a LNG or Floating Liquefied Natural Gas plant in Israel, an LNG facility in RoC, and a pipeline connecting Israel to Türkiye (Tagliapietra 2013: 23). From 2011 to 2014, several alternatives with varying technical characteristics and costs competed for the monetization of Levantine gas resources (Leongarov 2022). Some represented multinational operations with governmental backing, while others implied two countries working together. The European Commission listed the Cyprus-Vassilikos LNG terminal as tied to the so-called "Mediterranean gas storage" idea on

the 2013 Project of Common Interest (PCI) list. RoC and Greece requested EU financing for their chosen projects (Schulz 2019). During this time, the EU started to look toward Eastern Mediterranean resources as an alternative to increase supply diversity.

The proposition of the EastMed pipeline represented a strategic initiative aimed at materializing the collaborative energy endeavors between Israel, the RoC, and Greece. Envisaged to traverse from Israel and the RoC to Greece, ultimately integrating with the EU's gas network, this pipeline presented a considerably more ambitious and financially demanding undertaking than its counterpart, the power link. Projected costs ranged between \$17 and \$20 billion, rendering it a viable alternative contingent upon the discovery of additional gas reserves in the region or a substantial commitment of resources by Israel (Tsakiris 2014: 19-26). While the potential economic and political advantages for Greece were enticing, the project faced formidable challenges. The volatility of gas demand within the EU posed a significant hurdle for RoC, Israel, and the involved energy entities in constructing the pipeline to Greece. The adaptability of the LNG solution has been lauded by both RoC and Israel; this sentiment is underscored by its apparent significance for Israel in light of concerns associated with centralizing the nation's export traffic through a pipeline. However, it is imperative to note that Türkiye, RoC, and Greece have overlapping EEZs. Notably, the proposed route for LNG exportation traverses regions within this contested maritime domain (BBC 2020). In light of these considerations, Israel conducted an exploratory investigation into the feasibility of establishing an LNG or FLNG facility.

Meanwhile, the RoC authorities had strategically formulated plans for an LNG liquefaction facility since 2012, envisioning an initial capacity of nearly 7 billion cubic meters per year. The envisaged Vassilikos terminal was conceived to facilitate the exportation of RoC gas to both European and Asian markets, with the initial concession extending to include Israel and Lebanon. Recognizing the insufficiency of Greek Cypriot gas resources alone to substantiate the substantial investment required to establish an LNG export facility, the RoC sought Israeli financial support. The financial commitment, estimated to range between \$10 billion and \$15 billion, was deemed essential for covering the anticipated expenditures associated with the project. Additionally, the viability of the LNG plant project hinged on securing a supply of Israeli gas, thereby ensuring its economic feasibility and sustainability over the long term (De Micco 2014: 17-19). The Israeli government rejected a similar plan for political reasons, even though the energy corporations developing the Leviathan and Aphrodite gas reserves shared RoC inclination. Israel has reframed any new LNG export plant as a "strategic asset" that must remain under Israeli control. Around mid-2022, the energy ministers of RoC and Israel agreed on a road map for future negotiations regarding how to share the Aphrodite gas field, which Israel claims extends into the adjacent Ishai block. The dispute has been ongoing for a long time and has been a source of contention between the two countries (Ellinas 2022a).

Several factors have played a role in escalating geopolitical tensions and competition in recent years. As mentioned above, the primary source of contention in the area is the unresolved Cyprus issue and in this respect conflicts regarding maritime boundaries, and

divergent interpretations regarding the inclusion of islands in the demarcation of maritime zones (Prontera 2017: 299). The US's decreased involvement in the Mediterranean region has also contributed to regional and external actors taking a more assertive stand. This development has intensified existing rivalries in the region. It is important to note that regional problems are not just focused on energy resources, as these resources merely serve as catalysts rather than the primary purpose of such conflicts. In other words, tensions are not exclusively tied to resources; however, the access to and exploitation of resources have intensified pre-existing regional conflicts. There are geopolitical conflicts among the countries in the region, including the political issues between Israel and Lebanon, Israel-Palestinian, Türkiye and Greece, and the Cyprus issue, among others.

It is observed that political and economic challenges are interconnected in the Eastern Mediterranean. The discovery of the Aphrodite gas field around the island of Cyprus raised expectations that Turkish and Greek Cypriots would collaborate to capitalize on the region's abundant energy resources. However, rather than fostering cooperation, the discovery intensified existing tensions regarding the allocation of licenses for extracting and exporting offshore resources surrounding the island. The constraints on the extent to which economic interests can be utilized to expedite political agreements that have the potential to facilitate conflict resolution are particularly noticeable in the case of Lebanon. Although the maritime delimitation agreement between Israel and Lebanon raised some hope for the European markets, it remains insufficient in generating long-term progress towards resolving the extensive political crisis in Lebanon or mitigating the prevailing animosity between Israel and Hezbollah (Harari and Sözen 2023: 32).

The EastMed pipeline emerged as a strategically significant initiative to facilitate the direct exportation of Eastern Mediterranean gas to European markets. Nevertheless, despite receiving political backing from Israel, the RoC, Greece, and Italy, the proposed EastMed pipeline faces a significant financial hurdle. The funding allocated by the European Commission, even though it is seemingly substantial, is just a mere fraction, falling well below 1 percent of the total expenses associated with constructing the pipeline (Ellinas 2022b: 10). There is no doubt that the construction of the pipeline is improbable in the absence of considerable financial assistance. Israel, RoC, and Greece were actively advocating for it, although there were certain reservations regarding Italy's level of support. Ultimately, the decision of the US to withdraw its backing for the EastMed pipeline on the grounds of focusing on clean energy sources dealt a heavy blow to the realization of the project (Gencturk 2022). These limitations negatively affected the project and brought it to a standstill.

The Regional Security Complex Theory of the Eastern Mediterranean Hydrocarbon Puzzle

The Eastern Mediterranean region has arisen as a focus point for discussion on hydrocarbon resources, resulting in numerous ideas and viewpoints to explain the difficulties of the so-called "Eastern Mediterranean Hydrocarbon Puzzle." In this respect, arguably, the RSCT

may offer a helpful perspective on the dynamics of energy cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean. This international relations paradigm argues that security problems are not isolated but somewhat interrelated within a region. When applied to the Eastern Mediterranean, the RSCT helps to explain how security considerations, notably those connected to hydrocarbon resources, may foster collaboration while also serving as possible causes of conflict (Jabbar and Direkli 2023: 27-35).

One feature of the RSCT that is particularly pertinent to the Eastern Mediterranean is the notion that the security of one state in the area is inextricably linked to the security of neighboring ones. This interconnection may be seen in various ways, including similar worries about terrorism, political instability, and natural resource management, such as hydrocarbons. For example, the danger of terrorism affecting one nation may result in coordinated security measures among neighboring governments, generating a feeling of the regional security community (Foyou et al. 2018: 7). In the context of energy cooperation initiatives, the RSCT explains why some security concerns may be both a spur for collaboration and a cause of contention. Shared economic interests in hydrocarbon resources might encourage countries to collaborate to address common security issues. However, differing national interests and competing claims over resource-rich areas can also increase tensions, transforming energy-related challenges into larger security risks (Andrei 2016: 45-61).

The discovery of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean has fueled rivalry to control these resources, resulting in disputes over maritime boundaries and EEZ. According to the RSCT, such disagreements are more than just about allocating economic advantages; they are also linked to the region's larger security architecture. As governments attempt to establish their rights over hydrocarbon deposits, they also deal with a complicated web of security issues affecting their neighbors. Furthermore, the RSCT emphasizes that security complexes are not static and can change over time. The discovery and use of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean have changed regional security dynamics. States are forced to reconsider their security goals and alliances in light of the shifting energy scenario. This trend may lead to establishing ad hoc security structures and cooperation methods to meet new difficulties associated with energy security.

In this context, the impact of the RSCT can be observed through its ability to explain multifaceted interactions, power struggles, and cooperative endeavors among states in the Eastern Mediterranean. The RSCT posits that states within a particular geographic area may form a security community due to shared security concerns, historical ties, and geopolitical interdependencies. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the discovery of substantial hydrocarbon deposits has contributed to the emergence of a regional security complex, where states are interconnected by common energy interests and potential threats related to exploiting these resources.

The hydrocarbon puzzle serves as a focal point for regional competition and cooperation, aligning with the RSCT's recognition of key issues shaping a security complex. Exploring hydrocarbons in contested waters has heightened tensions between states such as Türkiye and RoC. Türkiye's exploration activities in areas claimed by RoC have led to disputes,

demonstrating how the hydrocarbon puzzle is intertwined with territorial and geopolitical issues. The role of external actors and international institutions in shaping the regional security complex is another area where the impact of the RSCT is evident. The theory suggests that global powers and international organizations can influence regional behavior and dynamics. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the involvement of external actors such as the EU, the US, and Russia has added an international dimension to the hydrocarbon puzzle. For instance, the EU, recognizing the strategic importance of the Eastern Mediterranean in its energy security, has sought to mediate disputes and promote regional cooperation through initiatives like the EMGF (Bastin 2021: 483-489). The involvement of external actors aligns with the RSCT's emphasis on the interconnectedness of regional and global dynamics, underscoring the theory's relevance in explaining the layered nature of the Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon puzzle.

The EU's role in promoting multilateralism and regional integration aligns with the RSCT's emphasis on the interconnectedness of security within a region. Through initiatives such as the European Neighborhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean, the EU seeks to promote economic development, political stability, and security cooperation among Eastern Mediterranean countries (Stivachtis 2018). By providing financial assistance, technical expertise, and institutional support, the EU contributes to establishing regional security architectures that address common threats and foster trust among neighboring states. The EU is also involved in energy security initiatives in the Eastern Mediterranean by promoting sustainable and equitable management of energy reserves. Through initiatives such as the EMGF and the Clean Energy for EU Islands Initiative, the EU seeks to facilitate energy cooperation, promote transparency in resource extraction, and mitigate the risk of resource-driven conflicts in the region (Maed 2018). By promoting energy diversification, renewable energy development, and interconnectivity among Eastern Mediterranean countries, the EU aims to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels and enhance their resilience to external shocks, thereby contributing to regional stability and security.

Additionally, the RSCT's impact is observed in its consideration of the implications of the hydrocarbon puzzle on regional stability and conflict resolution. The theory suggests that competition for energy resources can either exacerbate existing conflicts or provide opportunities for cooperation. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the competition for hydrocarbons has intensified longstanding territorial disputes, particularly between Türkiye and RoC. In the initial stages, Turkey's concerns were not solely about its sovereignty rights, but also about the rights of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and Turkish Cypriots. Turkey has always supported the rights to TRNC to share from the energy resources in the island.

Türkiye's exploration activities in areas claimed by RoC have led to heightened tensions and increased the risk of conflict. On the other hand, the RoC with Greek support has also pursued an assertive energy exploration strategy and have neglected to properly involve the TRNC and Türkiye in their energy exploration activities which has been perceived as exclusionary and escalatory. The RSCT's focus on the regional security complex provides a lens through which to analyze how these conflicts are intertwined with the hydrocarbon puzzle, highlighting the need for diplomatic efforts to prevent escalation.

Having said this, the RSCT also suggests that the hydrocarbon puzzle can catalyze cooperation. Despite ongoing disputes, regional states have recognized the potential benefits of joint hydrocarbon development, leading to diplomatic initiatives and negotiations (Youssef 2023: 8-21). For instance, the trilateral cooperation between RoC, Greece, and Israel exemplifies an attempt to transform the hydrocarbon puzzle into a cooperative venture, promoting economic integration and stability in the region. However, this attempt at cooperation excluded some littoral states, such as Syria and Türkiye. This cooperative dimension aligns with the RSCT's acknowledgment of the potential for shared interests to foster regional stability.

The RSCT's consideration of domestic dynamics within individual states also offers insights into the impact of internal factors on regional behavior. The theory recognizes that political regimes, economic dependencies, and societal factors play crucial roles in shaping states' approaches to managing and exploiting hydrocarbon resources. Domestic dynamics have influenced states' strategies and reactions to the hydrocarbon puzzle in the Eastern Mediterranean. For instance, Türkiye's pursuit of an assertive foreign policy in the region, including exploration activities in contested waters, is influenced by domestic considerations such as the need to secure domestic energy sources. Similarly, Egypt under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi rule, search for external alliance, and collaboration attempts with the US, European countries, Israel, and recently with Türkiye, are also successfully explained by RSTC. Egypt's position in the Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon landscape is pivotal, particularly when examined through the lens of RSCT. The country boasts a robust and diversified gas export infrastructure, including two major pipelines: the Arab Gas Pipeline (AGP) and the EasMed Gas pipeline. The AGP, with a capacity of 10 bcm annually, initially connected Egypt to Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, although its operation has been intermittently disrupted due to regional instability and terrorist attacks. Geopolitical tensions and economic considerations further complicate the Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon puzzle. For instance, the potential extension of the AGP to Türkiye, which could integrate gas supplies from Israel and potentially Lebanon, remains implausible due to the ongoing conflict in Syria and regional political disputes (Tsakiris 2021: 139-58). Meanwhile, the competitive landscape for gas exports, especially Israeli gas, poses significant challenges. Contracts committing Israeli gas to Jordan and Egypt face scrutiny regarding their viability in light of market conditions and pricing disparities. The Egyptian government's efforts to mitigate the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by reducing industrial gas prices further complicate the competitive standing of imported Israeli gas (Shama 2019: 95-110). Egypt's decision to halt LNG exports temporarily in 2020 due to low global prices and reduced domestic demand illustrates the delicate balance the country must maintain between supply and profitability. As LNG prices rebounded, Egypt strategically resumed exports, primarily targeting Asian markets with more favorable prices. This adaptability underscores Egypt's significant role in regional energy security and its capacity to influence market dynamics. Egypt's hydrocarbon strategy, shaped by its extensive export infrastructure and geopolitical positioning, is critical in the Eastern Mediterranean's energy security complex. The interplay of regional conflicts, economic competitiveness, and strategic energy alliances underscores this hydrocarbon puzzle's intricate and evolving nature.

In this respect, the Greek side under Nikos Christodoulides' leadership have received intense criticism from the opposition. Critics of Nikos Christodoulides, the president of RoC, made waves particularly concerning his handling of the Cyprus issue, drawing scrutiny from the island's two largest political parties, AKEL and DISY. AKEL, a left-wing party, accused the government of failing to make substantive progress towards resolving the longstanding Cyprus conflict, emphasizing its perceived lack of effective diplomacy and negotiation skills. Meanwhile, DISY, a right-wing party, criticized the RoC government for not taking a sufficiently assertive stance in defending RoC's interests, particularly regarding the exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean. These criticisms have contributed to a growing sentiment within the RoC for a more aggressive approach towards Türkiye, particularly in light of the country's assertive actions in the region (Philenews 2024).

Arguably, the RSCT of the Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon puzzle provides a framework for understanding how these dynamics unfold within the broader geopolitical context. The RoC's increasing assertiveness against Türkiye is fueled by a complex interplay of regional security concerns, energy interests, and diplomatic relations (Adamides 2022: 115-131). Türkiye's maritime claims and military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean have heightened concerns, prompting the RoC to seek support from the EU and other international allies to counter Türkiye's perceived aggression.

The RoC's strategic utilization of the EU as a diplomatic lever reflects the interconnectedness of regional security complexes, where states leverage alliances and international institutions to advance their interests and mitigate security threats. The EU's condemnation of Türkiye's actions in the Eastern Mediterranean and its support for the RoC's sovereignty rights bolster the RoC's position and contribute to a more assertive posture against Türkiye. This alignment of interests between the RoC and the EU underscores the significance of regional security dynamics in shaping diplomatic strategies and outcomes. Therefore, the RSCT's emphasis on the interplay between regional and domestic factors provides a nuanced understanding of how internal dynamics contribute to the complexities of the hydrocarbon puzzle.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the academic discourse on regional security and energy politics by applying RSCT to the Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon puzzle. While existing research has examined the region's energy disputes and geopolitical conflicts, this study advances the discussion by integrating state and non-state perspectives within RSCT. It demonstrates how energy resources are economic commodities and securitized assets that shape regional alliances, exclusions, and geopolitical confrontations. By emphasizing the intersection of security dynamics and energy politics, this study offers a holistic framework for understanding why economic incentives fail to override deep-rooted geopolitical tensions.

A key contribution of this research is its ability to bridge the gap between traditional state-centric security models and the increasing role of non-state actors such as multinational energy corporations and regional energy forums. While prior studies often focus on either state diplomacy or corporate interests, this study demonstrates how the two are interconnected, influencing the evolution of regional security structures. For example, excluding Türkiye from the EMGF is a political decision reflecting corporate risk assessments and investment strategies shaped by regional security concerns. The study highlights how security complexes reinforce themselves, preventing energy resources from catalyzing regional integration despite their economic potential.

This research also fills a critical gap in the literature by explaining why regional cooperation remains limited despite shared economic incentives. While liberal theories emphasize economic interdependence as a driver of collaboration, RSCT reveals that historical rivalries, territorial disputes, and strategic alliances create rigid security structures that prevent purely economic logic from dictating energy governance. The study illustrates that securitization of hydrocarbon resources leads to militarization, diplomatic standoffs, and the formation of exclusionary blocs rather than fostering inclusive governance frameworks. For instance, the EastMed pipeline project reflects economic feasibility concerns and strategic counterbalancing against Türkiye's regional influence.

Building on previous research, this study refines RSCT's applicability to the Eastern Mediterranean, demonstrating its ability to explain fragmentation and polarization in energy politics. Unlike studies focusing on bilateral disputes, this research situates regional tensions within a broader security framework, accounting for external actors such as the EU, the United States, and Russia and their influence on security dynamics. The findings suggest that energy diplomacy alone is insufficient for resolving long-standing conflicts and that achieving sustainable cooperation requires political and security-based negotiations alongside economic agreements.

Future research should explore potential pathways for desecuritization and regional integration, focusing on how diplomatic frameworks could mitigate security concerns surrounding energy resources. Additionally, further investigation into the role of emerging technologies, such as LNG innovations and renewable energy integration, could provide alternative routes for cooperation beyond conventional hydrocarbon extraction. Understanding how global energy transitions, particularly the shift toward decarbonization, affect the Eastern Mediterranean's geopolitical relevance will be essential in crafting future regional strategies.

In conclusion, while hydrocarbon resources can potentially transform regional economies, their securitization has reinforced geopolitical divisions rather than fostering cooperation. The findings underscore the need to shift from energy-centered diplomacy to broader political frameworks that address territorial disputes, security perceptions, and trust deficits. Without such efforts, the Eastern Mediterranean's hydrocarbon wealth will continue to be a source of conflict rather than a platform for regional stability and economic growth.

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