

# **Does Energy Cause Ethnic War? East Mediterranean and Caspian Sea Natural Gas and Regional Conflicts**

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The present book deals with a timeless and at the same time topical issue, regarding the possible correlation between energy and warfare or ethnic conflicts. The book analyses the 21st century upgraded role of natural gas and the wealth it accumulates, and tries to provide an answer on whether the successful exploitation of energy resources and the resulting economic benefits can be either a peace incentive or a catalyst for war, especially in 'fragile' regions.

Chapter 1 poses the theoretical considerations between energy and conflict, mainly focusing on a challenging part of the world, stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea. Chapter 2 depicts the European Union's multiple and divergent approaches regarding energy security and relations with its energy suppliers. The chapter further analyzes EU's attempts to securitise reliable alternative energy suppliers through the establishment of new pipelines such as the Southern Gas Corridor. Chapter 3 focuses on the Eastern Mediterranean natural gas reserves, describing all the complexities of potential energy exploitation through supranational cooperation between friendly and non-friendly states in the region. Chapter 4 analyses the energy deposits of the Caspian Sea as a means of meeting European energy needs, explaining in detail the complexities, the limitations and the potentials between the states of the region.

It is interesting to note, within this context, that the book predicts a number of developments that indeed occurred after its release. For example, the energy crisis in Europe after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is mainly attributed to EU's indecisiveness to find alternative natural gas suppliers; and to the reluctance of major energy companies to exploit their potential energy reserves due to the coronavirus pandemic. Another prediction of the book is Turkey's assertive involvement in Libya's matters, due to its exclusion from the architectural energy frame of the East Mediterranean region.

The book investigates the relationship and potential interdependence between energy security and geopolitics. It stresses that energy security forms an integral part of the foreign and national security policy of every country that aims to build bilateral political, economic and military relationships. Energy garners the interest of friendly (Greece, Israel and Cyprus) and traditionally non-friendly states (Greece and Turkey) and is therefore associated with geopolitical rivalries on a geoeconomic level. As a result, the geopolitics of energy play a crucial role on the international political agenda.

Based on that assumption, the authors proceed in assessing the impact of large scale energy projects (such as the EastMed Pipeline or the Trans Caspian Gas Pipeline) on regional ethnic conflicts and the overall stability of a region. The study thus focuses on the regions of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Caspian Sea, well known for their energy resources, their multiple ethnicities and their deep-seated conflicts and disputes. The authors attempt to examine whether the exploitation of the above resources could incentivise peace and cooperation among the regional states or if it further complicates the already strained relations between them. According to the authors, the existing energy security literature has so far failed to sufficiently examine the impact of energy on ethnic conflicts, and in the few cases that it does, it provides mainly simplistic or manichaeistic conclusions.

The answer to the main question posed by the authors, of whether energy causes ethnic wars, is a definite no. The authors conclude that energy is an additional factor that either exacerbates existing ethnic conflicts to some extent (i.e Greece-Turkey maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean) or has no direct influence at all, especially when it comes to deep-rooted ethnic conflicts and political disputes (i.e between Armenia and Azerbaijan about Nagorno-Karabakh in the wider Caspian Sea). It is proposed, though, that in some cases energy wealth has deepened the power game among regional actors (i.e Russia's role in the wider Southeast European region), but again it does not turn out to be an overriding factor for shaping relations between the countries involved.

The above thesis rests on the fact that conflict resolutions require quite complex procedures, under a specific political and social context, as well as the establishment of mutual trust between nations. The authors support that energy and the exploitation of resources can hardly incentivise or disincentivise this process.

Indeed, the discovery of new energy resources did not enable or facilitate multi-lateral regional political and defence cooperation. Strategic cooperation and partnerships emerged for other reasons and the energy dimension was either added later or was utilised for rapprochement reasons. For example, the establishment of the East-

ern Mediterranean Gas Forum was guided by broader geostrategic concerns, which reflected common perceptions of the countries involved, regarding their national security, and this despite the fact that energy did lie at the heart of the forum. The escalation of all regional ethnic and political conflicts, as well as the establishment of new regional alliances, had little to do with energy resources and occurred after certain political developments had taken place, such as the Mavi Marmara incident that led to the deterioration of relations between Turkey and Israel.

Indicatively, as pertains to the Eastern Mediterranean region, the authors conclude that the newfound energy wealth has left intact the ethnic and political conflicts that have been haunting the region for decades (i.e. Israel and Palestine), despite the fact that discoveries raised the prospect of regional energy market integration and the potential of collaboration in order to share the economic benefits and revenues. Towards this direction, some countries have signed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) agreements with each other (i.e. Cyprus-Israel in 2010). Unfortunately, aspects such as high construction and operating costs of the EastMed pipeline, the downgrade of Russian and Turkish economic and geopolitical interests in the region, the impressive upgrade of relations between Israel, Egypt, Greece and Cyprus, have indefinitely postponed any plan about the exploitation of energy reserves. It is highlighted that, eventually, such benefits do not offer sufficient incentives to overcome entrenched political grievances. Moreover, the authors question the common perception that Eastern Mediterranean gas deposits can drastically alter the EU's energy security in the medium term.

As to the Caspian region, the authors reach two conclusions. The first is that Caspian Sea deposits did not bring economic peace, or the prospect of stronger economic integration, or shared economic benefits for the countries involved (Kazakhstan, Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iran). The second conclusion is that the security architecture in the region has not been affected by the construction and operation of the various pipeline projects. The authors also point to the inability of the West (NATO and EU) to pull Caspian countries away from the Russian influence and, moreover, point out that its efforts to resolve the various regional conflicts did not have any remarkable results.

The study also expands on the changing dynamics of energy politics in the 'Southern Gas Corridor' project. Thus, they deal with the EU's energy diversification policy aiming to reduce European dependence on Russian gas, and with the United States' attempts to reduce Russian energy dominance over Europe by enabling EU to import more American LNG, which is a policy that clearly intensifies geopolitical competition between EU and Russia. The authors conclude that the above policy has a negligible

effect on the political equilibrium in the Caspian region. In addition, after thoroughly examining the EU-Russia relationship in the energy sector, the authors point out that Russia's competitive advantage lies in its vast energy resources and its ability to deliver them at a competitive price. By contrast, the EU's competitive disadvantage lies on long-lasting structural deficiencies, bureaucracy and lack of a common ground between member states -as they propose different energy supply sources and their interests thus diverge. The authors point to the 'necessarily symbiotic' relationship between Russia and the EU in terms of supply, as by 2025 Russia's share of EU gas consumption will be around 40%. As a result, the Southern Gas Corridor project is challenged by geopolitical factors and other competing pipelines. It is clear that the war in the Ukraine has upended this evaluation.

The authors also examine the role of Russia's diplomacy in the wider region of the Caspian and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. They conclude that Russia's energy diplomacy is not politicised, contrary to common belief. They also highlight the Russian 'Near Abroad' interest (the term referring to Russia's broader geopolitical interests) and warn the West that it is not likely to be diminished in the future.

The above important argument seems to be verified today in a somewhat prophetic way, as, following Russia's invasion in the Ukraine and the imposed EU economic sanctions, energy security and sufficiency of member states is at stake and it will remain so, as far as there is no alternative option in the short term.

As such an alternative, the authors examine the emergence of Turkmenistan and its potential as a major energy player in the wider region. The authors claim that the construction of the Trans Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP) and its connection with Southern Gas Corridor could be a game changer. An important question lies in price competitiveness, as Russia keeps its advantage in the European market. Turkmenistan's energy policy could also head eastwards to new markets (China, Afghanistan, India). Another important question concerns Russia's potential engagement in the exploitation of Turkmenistan's gas reserves –the so-called 'Russian route', a possibility which poses a risk for the Southern Gas Corridor and EU's prospects.

The authors stress that the key factor would be the price of Turkmen gas in various markets, rather than the geopolitical rivalries, despite the fact that the exploitation of the resources was so far mainly dependent on security and less on economic rationale. Therefore, the authors conclude that the impact of energy trade in EU-Russia antagonism is limited or nonexistent.

Finally, the authors make a reference to the recent Prespes Agreement (between Greece and the Republic of Northern Macedonia) as another point that validates their

thesis. Despite the fact that the expected energy cooperation might have affected negotiations, the various arguments both governments used to convince their parliaments and societies had nothing to do with energy.

All things considered, it is claimed that energy reserves in the regions of the Caspian and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, could under certain conditions provide an indigenous differentiated source of energy, but these can hardly contribute to overcoming longstanding regional conflicts. The settlement of these deep-rooted disputes does not depend on the successful exploitation of the resources, but instead requires the convergence of various political, social, and traditional security-related factors that hardly correlate with the gas reserves.

Furthermore, it is noted that investment decisions are related to several other conditions, such as energy market dynamics, commercial interests of energy companies, conditions of supply and demand etc. For instance, the EastMed Pipeline remains a difficult project with questionable technical and commercial viability, despite the United States previous political consent, as it is up to the markets and investors to decide whether they will engage or not, based on their own assessment criteria. On a wider basis, it is claimed that trade traditionally occurs irrespectively of politics, as no political pressure has ever managed to alter or curtail entrepreneurship. It is also highlighted that there is no political alliance that could directly or indirectly affect commercial viability and bankability of any project in the regions of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Caspian Sea.

Moreover, the authors point out that efforts should be made to craft a more localised and sustainable energy policy, that takes into account the limitations of the energy markets in the Caspian and the Eastern Mediterranean regions, as well as the technical (in terms of infrastructure etc.) capabilities of the parties involved.

It is quite intriguing that the authors provide original and sensitive information after conducting interviews with eponymous sources serving in high diplomatic, political, academic and business positions. This material is harmoniously combined with rich academic bibliography, creating a very convincing final outcome. As a result, the book could be of high importance to academics, political scientists, historians, policymakers and strategic investments consultants who wish to benefit in the field of energy geopolitics, strategic studies, economic diplomacy and international relations theory.

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