Energy market wars as a factor of military-political escalation in Eastern Mediterranean region: A Russian perspective

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Abstract: Regional multipolarity has increased the complexity of geopolitical interests along with the worsening of international relations. Geopolitics is a means of not only interpreting the state of the political environment, but also in projecting the desired geo-economic end state for an actor. A much more pragmatic approach to securing perceived national interests is observed among newly emerging non-Western international actors in the Mediterranean region. This article analyses the energy factor which influences military-political situation in Eastern Mediterranean region with an emphasis upon Turkey and Russia's sometimes cooperation and sometimes competition. The decision by Greece, Republic of Cyprus and Israel on commencement of construction of EastMed gas pipeline has been analysed. This decision was considered to be one of the key causes of the escalation in Libya. The conclusion is that Turkey strives to complicate the laying of any gas pipelines stretching from south-eastern direction to Europe bypassing its territory. The Russian escalation factor was also analysed. Finally, strategic risks for Turkey relating to its build-up of a military presence in Libya have been identified. These
factors form the basis for consequences of possible escalation of conflict for the entire region.

Subjects: Foreign Policy; Security Studies - Pol & Intl Relns; Strategic Studies

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1. Introduction
The global unipolar geopolitical order that has existed since the end of the Cold War and its bipolar order are evolving currently towards a multipolar order (Cooley & Nexon, 2020; Flemes, 2013; Ikenberry & Nexon, 2019). An increasing number of observers and commentators argue that the United States dominated unipolar global order is evolving towards a multipolar configuration of different sized powers at the local, regional and global levels (Chebankova, 2017; Cooper & Flemes, 2013; Lukyanov, 2010; Petito, 2016; Schweller, 2011). To some extent, this can be visualized in some of the geopolitically and geoeconomically contested regions of the world, such as the Middle East North African (MENA) region (Ehteshami, 2018; Kausch, 2015; Salloukh, 2013; Santini, 2017). As such, there are likely to be practical consequences and effects of the evolving global order in terms of the effects on the trends and dynamics of international relations and the balances of power.

The aim of the article is determining the influence of the energy factor in the military-political situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Often it is the views of the major Western powers that are heard the loudest, it is the intention of this paper to introduce other non-Western perspectives in international relations and geopolitics in the complex and volatile contemporary environment of the MENA region. There are newly emergent geopolitical actors that have a greater latitude of freedom in their foreign and security policy as a result of the relative decline of US power and influence that place pragmatism ahead of ideology in the pursuit of their interests. Among the newly emergent actors pursuing their own independent interests and goals appearing in the category rising non-Western actors in the MENA region are Turkey (Simons, 2021) and Russia (Mason & Suchkov, 2021). Our research question asks, are events in the Mediterranean region an indication of newly forming geopolitical regionalisms by non-Western actors with conflicting pragmatic national interests predominating?

The article is structured in the following manner, beginning with a theoretical section concerning the role of geopolitics in an evolving global order in influencing the behaviour of international actors. The next section concerns the nature of the geopolitical competition for influence in the MENA region in the post-Cold War era. Following this is a section on the method and approach used in this article in gathering and interpreting the empirical data. The final section concerns the detailing of the nature of the geopolitical competition in the MENA region in the contemporary times, with a focus on the actions of Turkey and Russia, to manoeuvre for a more advantageous position in realising their national interests and foreign policy goals.

2. Geopolitics in an evolving global order
In this work, we proceed from the fact that resource-type conflict behaviour characterizes the desire of a subject or entities to achieve the redistribution of necessary resources in their favour and to take control of the transportation routes. In particular, a shortage of energy sources can be a tool for rivalry and conflict. This implies a clear role for geopolitics in interpreting the mass media data of this article. Geopolitics is a contested term with regards to its definition and perception. When understanding the politics of geopolitics, it is necessary to point to both perception and outcomes. “Geopolitics is not just a way of seeing. It is also the actions and outcomes that simultaneously transform spaces, places and politics” (Flint, 2017, p. 302). Thus geopolitics can be seen as both a practice and a representation (Flint, 2017, p. 36). Kelly (2006) contends that
there are two distinct versions of geopolitics that contend in their academic formats as classical and critical. This paper shall employ the theoretical frame of critical geopolitics, which is defined as a “problematizing theoretical enterprise that places the existing structures of power and knowledge in question” (ÓTuathail, 1999, p. 107). It is consisting of a very broad set of literatures and tendencies. It has been argued that both of the variations of geopolitics are equally “correct” and can complement each other in informing an academic problem (Kelly, 2006, pp. 49–50). In the post-Cold War era of international relations and politics, critical geopolitics has been identified as being of policy relevance for a number of reasons.

Critical geopolitics is relevant to policy making in that it can help deconstruct the persistence of such stereotypical geopolitical conceptions and notions in popular and political culture. With its sensitivity to geographical difference and its critique ethnocentrism, it forces strategic thinking to acknowledge the power of ethnocentric cultural constructs in our perception of places and dramas occurring within them. (ÓTuathail, 1999, p. 117)

This geopolitical approach shall be used to interpret the significance of the mass media materials that have been collected for analysis in this article, which implies a role for popular geopolitics. Popular geopolitics is traditionally focused on the elite visions of media moguls, movie directors and media workers as the focus has been on media and popular culture artefacts (Dittmer & Gray, 2010, p. 1664). This has led to the call for scholars of popular geopolitics to “complement an interest in the discursive analysis of representations with a concern for audiences and the meanings that they construct out of popular culture and related texts” (Dittmer & Dodds, 2008, p. 453). Following from Dittmer and Gray (2010, p. 1673), this study intends to use “qualitative methods to focus on the everyday intersection of the human body with places, environments, objects, and discourses linked to geopolitics.” Thus media texts not only represent an informational interpretation of the physical domain events, but an attempt to influence the cognitive realm of the audience, which is crucial to understand in times of geopolitical uncertainty and instability.

Doyle (2008, p. 65) noted that “with the end of the Cold War, pressures toward regionalism are likely to become increasingly strong.” As such, there are likely to be reactions to these trends through the creation of regional crises that is the result of increased competition in an unstable pluralistic geopolitical hierarchy. As noted by Rumley (2005), rather than being something that is naturally occurring, a geopolitical regionalism is a construction of the imperatives of the political perception of actors. And therefore geopolitical regionalisms can have positive consequences for an actor when environmental conditions and trends align with aims and interests of an actor (Jay, 1979). Regionalism can be created to meet certain foreign policy and security functions, aims and goals of geopolitical actors.

The depletion of resources and growing demand for resources leads to unequal access to these resources. This factor is the main reason for the escalation of rivalry between the internal elements of states, and also increases the risks of involving these states in external conflicts in order to obtain energy sources (Colin, 2006, p. 333). Deficit or abundance can play a role in the emergence of competition, which can sometimes escalate into conflict (United States Institute of Peace [USIP], 2007, p. 8). In general, according to Dahrendorf (1994), any modern conflict is a conflict between resources and prestige. The Eastern Mediterranean region corresponds to this concept since there were open giant gas fields that became the centre of attention of large international players (El Bassoussy, 2018). The motives in the struggle for this resource vary greatly. We applied this approach in our work to government entities, primarily Turkey, Southern Europe and North Africa. We also relied on research (Gurbanov, 2016; Shaffer, 2011), which examined recently discovered reserves of natural gas in Israel and the consequences of this discovery for the Middle East and the Mediterranean region.

3. Post-cold war overview of geopolitics in the MENA region
Any sense of order and stability in the region has been severely compromised by specific events and trends, such as the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the progressive fracturing of the
regional order caused by the Arab Spring. The results of these processes and events has been a relative decline of US power and influence in the region, together with an increase of power and influence by China, Iran, Russia and other regional actors (Paraschos, 2017; Zulfqar, 2018). Russian foreign policy interests and goals in MENA have increased markedly from the 1990s, now playing an increasingly important and influential role in the region (Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2013). Russia's involvement in the MENA region has increased significantly since the Arab Spring, and is guided by pragmatic goals and interests (Morozov & Simons, 2019; Simons, 2019). Geostrategic interests have been secured through Russia's de-ideologized foreign policy, economic assistance (nuclear power plants and loans) and military equipment sales, and an oppositional stance to US interests (Póti, 2018, p. 13).

The modern Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is the epitome of a shatterbelt. One decade ago, the MENA region was relatively stable by today's standards. [...] In stark contrast, the MENA region today is exponentially more volatile: Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen remain mired in violent conflict, generating a degree of insecurity that is unprecedented in the region's modern history and revolutionary in its implications for regional and international order. (Paraschos, 2017, p. 17)

The US has played a significant role in the MENA region and beyond since September 2001. However, there has been some very pointed critique aimed at the US approach to the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria by Anthony Cordesman. This criticism is centred on the fact that there have been three successive presidential administrations fighting wars that result in tactical victories, but without any clear strategy for ending any of the mentioned wars or bringing about stable peace. “It is dealing with major insurgencies or civil war as if they were limited terrorist movements. [...] It has no grand strategy and is fighting half a war.” Therefore, tactical and operational aspects of armed conflicts that the US is currently entrenched are harming its strategic interests and capacities. Other actors are beginning to fill the voids left in different global regions affected by US withdrawal or indecision.

Studying the connection between the struggle for the European gas market and the Libyan war opens up opportunities for further theoretical studies of modern international hybrid conflicts. Along with this, it will help to better assess the influence of the energy factor on geopolitical processes, and also helps to deepen understandings of how exactly energy interests influence the decision-making by political leaders of states on entering into military conflicts. Considering that there are other disputed zones with minerals, the revealed motivation of states in the current Libyan war will help to predict the likely behaviour of other powers in the regions, where the struggle for resources and ways of their transportation is also escalating. Particularly promising in this regard is the study of Southeast Asia and the Gulf of Aden.

4. Method and approach
The approaches to textual analysis shall include content analysis (quantifications of different elements in text), argumentation analysis (the structure of argumentation used), and the qualitative analysis of ideas in the content (with a focus on people and events) (Boréus & Bergström, 2017, pp. 7–9). The combination of these approaches is expected to yield results on the ontology (what exists) and epistemology (knowledge and how we “know” things) of reactions to media textual depictions of geopolitics and international relations within the context of the increasing tensions in the MENA region within the context of EastMed. The objects of study include people, foreign and security policy, interests and values, word and deed and so forth (Boréus & Bergström, 2017, pp. 1–2). This will serve as the basis for revealing a highly geopolitically unstable and evolving security environment.

A search was conducted for information about the conflict in Libya by analysing open sources and the media. Then we evaluated the military-political position of the parties involved in the conflict. Along with this, a content analysis of information on the agreement between government
entities and representatives of the warring parties in Libya, in particular between Turkey and the Government of National Accord, was carried out. Official documents and articles were also studied that highlighted the legal aspects of delimitation of maritime borders (Seoudi, 1977). Based on this, we assessed the feasibility of resolving in the legal field the existing contradictions around gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition, in this work, we evaluated the nature of gas production in Europe and the configuration of gas pipelines passing through the Eastern Mediterranean region. Taking these factors into account and comparing the military-political positions of the direct and indirect participants in the Libyan War made it possible to identify the strategic risks of further escalation.

5. Geopolitical competition and conflict for influence in the MENA region

5.1. Escalation in Libya

At the end of 2019, Turkey began repositioning its military to Libya upon receipt of the correspondence request from the Government of National Accord (GNA) represented by Fayez al-Sarraj in Tripoli. Turkey, Qatar, and a number of other countries actively support GNA. Field marshal Khalifa Haftar, the chief commander of Libyan National Army (LNA) opposes GNA. Who is supported by Egypt, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), UAE, France, Russia, and a number of other states. Turkey’s President claimed that there were contractors in Libya who had sided with LNA. Allegedly, representatives of the Russian private military corporation (PMC), Wagner is among the contractors. A very volatile mix of different interests and goals exist and compete in the MENA region. On 2 January 2020 the Turkish parliament approved draft legislation on Libya; the bill was signed by the Turkish President. The draft legislation permits the possibility of sending Turkish military forces to Libya. 325 members of parliament voted in favour of the draft law, while 184 opposed it. Information about Turks’ commitment to sending a military contingent to Libya has circulated since the end of 2019. Recep Erdogan made such statements as well. Moreover, based on a number of attributes Turkey has already relocated militants to Libya representing such organizations as Sultan Muran’s Division, Suqour Al-Sham, and Failak Al-Sham. Intensified arms supplies and military hardware from Turkey had been spotted earlier. This increase in supplies commenced right after a meeting of Erdogan with his protégé, Sarraj. Activated relocation of military equipment and hardware to force which underpin GNA took place after the launch of the offensive operation (April 2019) by LNA. In fact, for the past several years Turkey has been forging channels for the infiltration of terrorists from Maghreb to Syria and back. This relocation has been performed regardless of the specific objectives of the Turkish leadership in the Libyan or Syrian theatre of operations. Turkish military experts were responsible for coordination and logistics, as well as MIT (Turkey’s national intelligence agency) and PMC SADAT, which had been reported by Turkish press.

At the end of December 2019 Erdogan paid a visit to Tunisia where he had met with his peer Kais Saied. Saied was supported in the presidential elections by the influential Islamic Renaissance Party, which had regained its influence after the Arab Spring. Notably, its leader, Rached Ghannouchi, has previously met with the Turkish President in Ankara back in 2017. According to certain sources the visit by Erdogan, accompanied by the minister of internal affairs and the minister of foreign affairs, as well as his chief of intelligence of Tunisia was a “surprise”. Almost simultaneously Turkey sent two frigates to the shores of Algeria. In this context, GNA of Libya’s Department of Internal Affairs Fathi Bashagha announced that the “Turkish-Tunisian-Algerian” alliance had been established in order to support the Libyan government. According to some Turkish analysis, at the meeting with Saied, Turkey’s President could discuss access to air space and the air facility and port of Tunisia. According to Ahmed al-Mismari, a LNA representative, Turkey was relocating Syrian insurgents from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (previously known as Al-Nusra Front) and the Islamic State to Libya via Tunisia. “One of Tunisian airports is used, namely Djerba airport, where they disembark groups of terrorists and then from Tunisia they dispatch them to Libya via [a mountain group in western Libya] Jabal al Gharbi District”, stated al-Mismari. According to Andrey Koshkin, Turkey’s deployment of insurgents in Libya via the Tunisian airport
may be performed without the knowledge or consent of Tunisia's official authorities. The government authorities of Tunisia were not informed of the transit of terrorists to Libya via Djerba airport. Koshkin said this was due to the fact "obscure schemes allow not only to finance and arm terrorist organizations but also to relocate them, recruit and train insurgents bypassing official authorities and official channels. Most likely, Turkish intelligence services deployed terrorists from Syria to Libya via Tunisia with the support of Tunisian militants. Unfortunately, there are plenty of them in this country and they feel quite comfortable there. Tunisia's government authorities are currently unable to control their actions".23

Thus, there are grounds to believe that Ankara is preparing to directly support the GNA in Libya. It strives to enjoy maximum international support. This is reasonable, taking into account the number of countries that are against such activities by Ankara. The states which support Khalifa Haftar are not going to ignore the support of the GNA by Turkey. Undoubtedly they will ramp up their support of the LNA. For Turkey it is extremely important to have its own coalition, even if it is a political one. Without such a coalition Ankara's actions will seem like the military aggression of a rogue state. Despite acknowledgement of GNA by the United Nations it is critically important for the Turks not to end up in isolation in this standoff. Otherwise their positions in the region will be critically undermined. At the same time, Turkey's possibility to claim its rights to hydrocarbon deposits in Eastern Mediterranean region will be diminished. The more allies Turkey secures and the stronger GNA gets from military standpoint, the more changes it will have to oppose any potential energy projects in the south-eastern direction which are controlled by Turkey. Besides, support of political forces underpinned by Muslim Brotherhood or having strong ties with the same is also part of strategic goals of the Turkish government. This is because after Arab Spring the influence of Turkey and its ally Qatar on a number of Northern African counties has been significantly reinforced. However, over a certain period of time the situation had substantially changed. In 2013 a countercoup took place in Egypt. It was endorsed by Saudi Arabia and UAE (Korotayev et al., 2016). In parallel with these events in 2014 in Libya since 2014 Khalifa Haftar, a protégé of KSA, UAE and Egypt, gains popularity and political weight. In fact, Ankara and Doha have every justification to believe that the collapse of GNA in Tripoli there would be followed by a chain reaction of failures of political forces in the Maghreb countries which are related to Muslim Brotherhood. Such turn of events would automatically result in weakened positions of Turkey and Qatar in the vitally important region.

5.2. Development of military operations in Libya via the prism of Turkish involvement

As discussed above, Turkey's involvement in the military operations in Libya at various levels is induced by the overall complication of the military situation for the GNA. The Libyan National Army, enjoying direct support through military assistance from a whole group of countries and having significant domestic demographic and oil resources, maintains an operational initiative in key directions of the conflict's development and attempts to decide the conflict through the military means only. Though the main strategic aim established by Haftar (conquest of Tripoli) has not been achieved yet, he managed to make great advances. Under his command, the strategically important city of Sirte was occupied,24 and he also managed to advance along the coast towards Misrata.

The growing pressure on Tripoli actually forced Turkey to abandon its indirect support to Libya's GNA and proceed to open engagement in the conflict. As a result, the Government of eastern Libya in Tobruk actually designated Turkey as their direct adversary in the Libyan war, accusing it of supporting international terrorism in Tripoli. In addition to supplies of arms by sea and air, Turkey began to more actively switch its military advisers and instructors (who support the actions of various groups of the Syrian fighters) to Tripoli, to demonstratively ignore the arms embargo25 and to actively use the attack and reconnaissance UAVs for the benefit of the Libyan GNA. Using these arms, the Turks directly attack the forces and infrastructure of the LNA, and apply the high-accuracy guided ammunition. Turkey also furnishes the information obtained through agents and technical intelligence service to the GNA of Libya and supports them with the electronic
warfare. In addition, Turkish state propaganda conducts massive media attacks aimed at discrediting Haftar, the LNA, the Government of eastern Libya in Tobruk and, at the same time, contributes to the legitimacy of the GNA in Libya. These actions were formally legitimized through intergovernmental agreements between Tripoli and Ankara. Turkey uses a similar rationale to that of the Russian diplomacy in Syria to justify its military presence and actions in Libya by reference to the official invitation from an internationally recognized Government.

Using the ground forces being the units of Islamist militants switched from Idlib, Africa, and North Aleppo, as well as air support using modern Bayraktar TB-2 UAVs, Turkey forced the LNA to shift to position warfare south of Tripoli, suppressing the offensive activities of Haftar’s troops, delivering quite painful strikes on the gatherings of LNA infantry and military equipment. This allowed the Libyan GNA’s troops to undertake a number of successful offensive operations during 2019, occupying al-Aziziya area and retaking the important city of Gharyan from the LNA. The main result of the Turkish military assistance can be regarded as the failure of plans of Haftar and his supporting countries to forcefully seize Tripoli (or block the capital by cutting off the roads leading to Misrata and Zawiya). Therefore, at the first stage, Turkish military assistance played a crucial role in the military and political survival of the Libyan GNA.

The overstretched supply chains, lack of a full-fledged air defence system in Tripoli, vulnerability of major logistics channels and air dominance of the LNA all make Turkey’s long-term actions in Libya difficult. The obvious logistical problems, inter alia, comprise the long distance from Turkey to the main conflict area. The closest Turkish airbase is located in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) within the distance of about 1900 km to Tripoli, and Turkey’s main attack aircrafts F-16 need refuelling in the air. There is also a risk of encounter between the Turkish and Egyptian air forces. At the same time, Tunisia refused to provide its airspace to Turkey for the Turkish military operation in Libya. It is difficult to use airfields controlled by the GNA, given the ability of Haftar’s air force to launch air strikes on them. Military, logistics and material difficulties can significantly reduce the ability of the Turks to influence the development of the situation. In addition, attempts to act on the principle of reasonable sufficiency come across the increasing efforts of the LNA to achieve direct military results (accompanied by the increased losses of Turkey and its proxy forces), which at this stage already indicates the insufficient amount of Turkish military assistance.

It presents Ankara with a difficult choice: will Ankara be able to simultaneously conduct military operations in Syria, Libya and Iraq, manoeuvring its resources? If its military involvement is maintained at the current level, the negative trends for the Libya’s GNA related to the LNA advancing south of Tripoli and the capture of Sirte, will only worsen, thereby endangering Turkish positions in Tripoli and making difficult the achievement of the political and economic goals of the war. The increased load on the operation through the build-up of regular troops, as well as additional proxy forces (including for the account of the Syrian operation) will dramatically increase the cost of the entire operation in Libya, in absence of any guarantee of success. Such a risk is related to the fact that a group of countries supporting the LNA could conduct a symmetrical build-up of support, essentially involving Turkey in the struggle for resource capacities, which Turkey is unlikely to win. The total resources of the countries behind Haftar far exceed those of Turkey and Qatar.

It can be stated that the initial operational and tactical successes of Turkey’s long-distance military operation in Libya caused serious military, political and economic problems for Ankara, as it has been involved in a long struggle for attrition in a remote theatre of operations, where a stronger coalition of European and Middle Eastern countries is working against it.

5.3. The gas factor of escalation in Eastern Mediterranean region
The decision to render military support to GNA on the part of the Turkish government was stipulated not only by the threatening environment due to the advance of Khalifa Haftar’s forces.
Another important factor was the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) which took place on 24–25 July 2019. The participants included Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, the United States, Palestine, and Italy. The meeting took place at the background of the escalation in the Mediterranean Sea after Turkey’s President Recep Erdogan had sent several drill ships to work in the disputed area. In accordance with the relevant maritime legislation the zone belongs to Cyprus, however, it is disputed by Ankara. In particular, Turks are drilling near the seashore of Northern Cyprus. Washington and European Union (EU) took a negative stance towards the above. Such actions on the part of Turkey are not a surprise. Please see Figure 1 for a visual overview of the region. There are serious differences due to Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) in the Mediterranean Sea. These differences aggravated once large gas fields had been discovered in its eastern part over the past two decades (El Bassoussy, 2018). Their reserves are estimated at 122 trillion cubic feet of gas (Levantine basin), and this corresponds to approximately 3.5 trillion cubic meters. Together with the gas volumes in the delta of Nile (6.5 trillion cubic meters) the total reserves amount to nearly 10 trillion cubic meters of gas.

The largest among them are Zohr gas field (Egypt), Leviathan and Tamar (Israel), Aphrodite (Cyprus) gas field. Taking into account the volumes of gas contained in these gas fields and the complicated historical, cultural and political relations between countries in this region, the fight for such gas fields was inevitable. One of the salient confrontations is the dispute between Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)—on the one hand, and Greece and the Republic of Cyprus—on the other hand. The historic resentment is further aggravated by claims of these countries to EEZ in Eastern Mediterranean region. These collisions are here to stay, despite the fact that Greece and Turkey are NATO member states.

Libya, more precisely GNA, claims its right to Greek offshore exploration, to the south of Crete Island (see Mazis & Sotiropoulos, 2016). This is a foundation for possible conflict between Tripoli and Athens. The second aspect is that in such a configuration of EEZ Turkey and Libya/GNA would control substantial maritime territory for the development of the fields located in the same. Also, their EEZ divide Eastern Mediterranean region into two parts. This is quite significant considering that the agreement signed on 2 January 2020 by and between Cyprus, Greece and Israel in Athens on the construction of the Eastern Mediterranean pipeline, EastMed). If implemented this pipeline which is 1900 kilometres long would connect opened and newly discovered gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean region with European markets via Cyprus, Greece, and Italy. The

Figure 1. Demarcation of the maritime boundary according to Ankara’s version and GNA headed by Sarraj.
The project is being developed by IGI Poseidon SA—a joint venture the Greek government-owned supplier Depa SA and the Italian Edison SpA. However, Italy intends to sign the agreement later on. The project itself was approved back in 2015 by EC. Its capacity is estimated at 10 billion cubic meters of gas per annum. Its construction is estimated to be finalized in 2025. If the project is implemented it would mean the arrival of an alternative source of gas and route of energy supplies to Europe. This is extremely unacceptable to Turkey.

European countries strive for diversification not only of natural gas resources, but its supply routes as well. Ankara understands this, and therefore for many years the Turkish government has been trying to make Turkey the only gas supply route from the south-eastern direction. Correspondingly, Ankara’s objective is to lock in all the pipeline gas supplies. So far, Turkey has been quite successful at tackling this objective. In particular, Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) is under construction; it includes South Caucasus Pipeline, Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline, and, Trans Adriatic Pipeline. Its total length is estimated to reach 3500 km with the cost of US$ 45 billion. The resource base behind SGC is the Azerbaijani gas field Shah Deniz. It is anticipated that commercial suppliers of gas to Europe via SGC would commence in 2020, once the construction of, Trans Adriatic Pipeline is completed. 6 billion cubic meters of gas will be supplied via that pipeline to Turkey and another 10 billion cubic meters of gas will be delivered to Europe. Another gas pipeline—Turkish Stream—was commissioned on 8 January 2020 and built by Russia with the purpose of mitigating dependency on Ukraine as a transit country. Its potential throughput capacity is 31.5 billion cubic meters of gas per year. Ankara aims to further enhance its monopoly position of a transit country supplying gas to Europe in the south-eastern direction. This automatically means its resentment of any other pipelines which may be built in order to bypass the Turkish territory.

Turkey needs the status of the main transit country not only to enhance its own geopolitical status. Ankara requires this to avoid increased influence on the part of its competitors, i.e. Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt. Turkey has rather tense relations with Egypt after the military counter-coup in 2013 when Mohamed Morsi was toppled. Notably, official representatives of Egypt confirmed that their country had been prepared to take part in EastMed project. Cairo’s objective is clear: they intend to build yet another route for gas supplies, primarily, from Zohr gas field which supplies gas to Jordan. As Egypt joins EastMed the resource potential of this pipeline will increase. This would have a favourable effect on its implementation.

Turkey is not interested in this scenario for several reasons: (1) After the launch of EastMed Europe will diversify gas supplies from the south-eastern direction, which indicates that Turkey’s geopolitical significance will be diminished; (2) Positions of Greece and Republic of Cyprus will be enhanced. Greece becomes one of the main gas hubs of Europe in the south-easterly direction (both SGC and EastMed will be part of it). Republic of Cyprus will reinforce its position on the international arena; (3) Claims to EEZ by Athens and Republic of Cyprus would be reinforced at the international level, which may strengthen positions of these countries. Such course of events would weaken Turkey in its claims in Eastern Mediterranean region; (4) Increased geopolitical significance of Greece, Cyprus, and Israel coupled with their increased revenues from gas exports is not acceptable for Ankara due to historic, cultural, geopolitical, and geo-economic collisions with these countries; (5) Potential accession of Egypt to EastMed which is oriented at forging ties with KSA and UAE after Morsi’s toppling contradicts strategic interests of Turkey.

At the same time, one should note a generally favourable tone of the United States in terms of its assessment of Athens, Nicosia, and Tel Aviv. Yet the tensions between the US and Turkey are growing due to the latter’s Operation Peace Spring offensive in northern Syria, its S-400 missile system purchase from Moscow and the sanctions threatened by Washington. In this context, EastMed pipeline is lobbied in the United States. This is evident due to the US Congress’s passing of a draft law called Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act. It was due to that law that embargo had been lifted for supplies of U.S. weaponry to Cyprus. This, undoubtedly, may be viewed as an anti-Turkish measure. Against this background Turkey announced
deployment of its unmanned aircraft system military base in Geçitkale (TRNC). All of the necessary pre-conditions are present for military-political escalation.

5.4. The Russian factor and the domestic political situation in Turkey

Participation of Russia in the Libyan conflict on the side of Haftar may be conditioned by the fact that in case of his victory and capture of Tripoli together with Misrata, as well as other territories controlled by the GNA’s forces, Moscow may expect to receive a concession for the development of oil and gas fields in Libya itself and its EEZ. Europe is viewed as a potential buyer of the extracted hydrocarbons. Therefore, hypothetically, if the LNA establishes control over the entire Libyan coast through oil and gas production and its subsequent sale, Russia would be able to increase its share in the European market. By doing so, Moscow could compensate for some of the possible losses that it would incur due to the US sanctions against the Nord Stream-2 pipeline and the countries involved in its construction.

The main problem is related to the fact that Russia supports Haftar in Libya, i.e. the enemy of the GNA, which is supported by Turkey. This is complicated by the situation in the Syrian conflict zone, where Turkey does not fulfil its obligations under the Sochi agreements of September 2018. Then it was about the intention of the parties “to create along the line of contact between the armed opposition and government troops by 15 October [2018—author’s note] a 15–20 kilometres deep demilitarized zone with the withdrawal of radical militants, and to withdraw heavy weapons, in particular, all tanks, MLRSs, artillery of all opposition groups from this zone by October 10”.

In reality, this did not happen, and radical groups supported by Turkey have been attacking the Russian air base Khmeimim for almost a year and a half. As a result, in December 2019, the offensive of pro-Syrian government forces, including the Russian armed forces, began in the province of Idlib. Accordingly, in order to reduce the risk of a direct armed conflict, Moscow and Ankara worked to coordinate their actions and de-escalate the situation at the meeting between Putin and Erdogan in Moscow on 5 March 2020, which may not exclude the situation getting out of control. In addition, the commissioning of Turkish Stream, controlled by Ankara, adds to the complexity.

As a consequence, Moscow needs to act in such a way that the contradictions with the Turks in Syria do not have a destructive impact on their relations in Libya and vice versa. Mutual consideration of the positions of two countries on at least two directions requires a high degree of coordination of efforts through the Ministries of Defence, Foreign Affairs, Intelligence Services and the leaders of two states. One of the scenarios may be an exchange of positions on Libya and Syria between Moscow and Ankara, but it will be quite difficult to achieve this, because, if there are only three main parties to the conflict in northern Syria, i.e. Moscow, Damascus and Ankara, the situation with Libya is complicated by numerous sponsors of Haftar. The military situation in Libya described in earlier sections shows that Berlin agreements do not look like a serious obstacle to de-escalation of the situation in Libya. Therefore, the resolution of the Libyan crisis by political and diplomatic means seems to be unlikely. In addition, the alternative hypothetical scenario of the preserving the same military and political situation will not last long, because there are too many contradictions among the direct and indirect participants in the confrontation, where each wants to see the crisis resolution in his favour.

The probable interrelation of two conflicts in Libya and Syria draws attention. On the part of Haftar, it would be extremely illogical not to take advantage of the situation in Syria, given de facto non-observance of the ceasefire regime and the current embargo on supplies of arms to the Libyan conflict zone. The greater the crisis in Idlib, the more the LNA is capable to conduct military operations despite Berlin agreements. To impede the advance of the Syrian Arab Army in the province, supported by the Russian aerospace forces and special forces, in order to eliminate the terrorist enclave, the Turks need as many insurgents as possible. However, given their low level of training, Ankara regularly mixes its own military men with the militants it supports. Strikes on Turkish and pro-Turkish units in Syria, need for Turkish leadership to support Syrian insurgents to
impede the advance of the pro-Assad forces, financial cost of the military operation—all this reveals the vulnerability of Turkey, which can be used by Haftar to arrange a strike on the positions of the GNA.

It is also worth noting that there is a certain tolerance threshold for Erdogan’s military operations within Turkish society. Sharp rise of losses among Turkish military personnel in conflict zones has a negative impact on the political positions of the current Turkish president. Thus Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the Chairman of the main Turkish opposition Republican People’s Party, called “those who rule the state to prevent new victims. We do not want to quarrel with our Syrian neighbours, much less be a proxy war instrument. Turkey should not be a contractor for global players in the Middle East, and our military men should not pay such a price”.67 Given the strike underwent by the ruling Justice and Development Party in the last elections,68 the degradation of the situation in the border zone, the increasing flow of refugees and negative economic consequences can further undermine the position of the ruling party. Although the next presidential elections in Turkey are to be held only in 2023, the general negative factors connected with the military activities of Ankara in Syria, Libya and Iraq, having the prospect of even more complications in the relations with Israel, Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, are capable of creating a negative situation for Erdogan. Taking into account the fact that in January 2020 the rating of the Turkish president fell to 41.9%,69 which is the minimum of his support since October 2018, the above mentioned reasons may have a cumulative effect of critical reduction of the voters’ confidence in him.

Finally, when considering the situation in Syria and Libya in the broad context of Russian-Turkish relations, the interdependence of Moscow and Ankara is increasingly evident, as they are guarantors of de-escalation regimes in both cases, which are not always respected. The context of Russian-Turkish interaction will be one of the most important factors that can influence the Libyan crisis and, consequently, the outcome of the struggle for the energy resources and energy supply routes of the entire region.

5.5. Summary and analysis of media data
The Arab Spring affected the geopolitical stability of countries that were caught up in the events of regime change and the chaos that has followed. This situation has fuelled the creation of geopolitical shatterbelts in the MENA region owing to the collapse of state structures and the creation of failed states, such as Libya. This fits with the observation by Paraschos (2017). When natural resources that are in high demand in wealthy markets, such as the European energy market, the result is to trigger increased competition by actors with the means and political will to become competitively engaged to meet take advantage of the situation, which was predicted by Colin (2006) as an emerging trend for a source of growing conflict and competition. This is especially so in the context of an evolving global order, where the US as the current hegemon is in visible decline. Two of the emerging regional actors in MENA, Turkey and Russia, sometimes cooperate and sometimes compete. Both are committed to pursuing a pragmatic and not ideological path to attaining national interests and goals, which agrees with the observations and conclusions of Pöti (2018) and Simons (2021).

Media reports that were sourced in this paper detail an interesting and yet alarming picture of the newly emerging geopolitical regionalism and competition between Turkey and Russia in the Mediterranean region. They mark what Flint (2017) noted that geopolitics is not only a practice, but also a representation in the informational and cognitive realms. This is not only a struggle in the physical tangible world, but also the intangible world of politics that is constituted of perceptions and opinions driven and supported by the informational flows to enable a greater latitude in the operational choices available to Turkey and Russia. Although both countries and the opposing coalitions of interests are present in Libya in the form of official advisors from Turkey and Russia, there are also the use of proxy forces (irregular military forces, private military contractors, and weapon supplies to the respective sides) used for indirect engagement against each other’s
national interests and to uphold their own. A direct military confrontation would be too risky for both sides, especially given the different interests being pursued by both Turkey and Russia not only in Libya, but Syria and in post-Soviet space as well. Hence the need for cool geopolitical pragmatism as cooperation is required in other geopolitical regionalisms. What is clear, there are a multitude of factors that influence and drive the competition and shape the opposing alliances of interests, such as historical memory, culture, geopolitics, national pride and interests, and matters of economic power and influence. Furthermore, the nature of the geopolitical interpretations and manoeuvring of Turkey and Russia in the MENA seems to suggest that geopolitics serves as a means to position themselves more advantageously for geo-economic opportunities that were previously constrained under a strong US unipolar hegemony. Although, this aspect should be the subject of further research in order to test its validity.

6. Conclusions
In the introduction of this paper, the following question was posed, are events in the Mediterranean region an indication of newly forming geopolitical regionalisms where newly emergent international and regional actors with pragmatic national interests dominate? Certainly, the end of the bipolar global order of the Cold War and the weakening of the US unipolar global order for a more multipolar configuration has changed geopolitics and international relations. This is especially evident in the MENA region, where a multitude of global, regional and local actors are vying for influence and power. Given that there is no longer an effective global monopoly or duopoly that constrains the intent and actions of lesser actors, the region has become more unstable and tense as there is an absence of established and enforced rules of the “game”. Critical geopolitics is a useful theoretical lens in this case study as it more sensitive to the nuances of regional culture, politics and foreign policy and compels strategic thinking to acknowledge those perceptions and constructs that are expressed in academic, media and political texts.

The assumed End of History in 1991 with the end of the Cold War owing to the collapse of the Soviet Union has ushered in a new geopolitical era owing to a number of cascading effects that have followed. Although, the US emerged as the unipolar global power, Turkey “lost” its foreign and security policy identity as an actor intending to block the expansion of Soviet influence that gave some leeway in independent thinking and action in international affairs. This drift from the US shadow has been further encouraged as a result of the Global War On Terror and the Arab spring that were further exacerbating tensions between US and Turkey, and permitting further opportunity for greater freedom of action that has aligned with a more assertive foreign policy agenda for Turkey. The Soviet Union’s collapse has been somewhat turned around with Russia’s rise as a great power and one that is more assertive in terms of pursuing its own pragmatically based interests and goals in selected global regions, such as MENA. Russia and Turkey are positioning themselves as challengers to the declining US global hegemony, although for different reasons and motivations. Turkey and Russia’s rise has been more easily facilitated through the relative decline of the capability and capacity of US hard and soft power, and an increasingly paralysis in the political system. This is in keeping with the notion of an increasing non-Western multipolar global order, which has driven geopolitical competition for natural resources and control of transportation routes.

This case study represents a contemporary illustration of newly emerging regional geopolitical actors within the framework of a non-Western multipolar global order that pursue pragmatic and not ideological (such as “exporting democracy”) national interests in their foreign policy. Given the competing actors and tensions, fact or perception can automatically result in military-political escalation in Libya. This course of events would further postpone its return to stability which was lost after the intervention by the alliance of Western nations and international terrorist groups in 2011. However, Turkish deployment of military may potentially have an impact on the situation in Libya and beyond. The military effort to sustain GNA, and prospectively an evolution of that success would have an impact on adjacent territories. Energy is one of the
determinant factors which shape the military-political configuration in the region. The discovery of new sources of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean region (El Bassoussy, 2018; Shaffer, 2011) shall result in reinforcing the fight for Europe’s gas market.

According to some forecasts gas consumption will grow in this region. This will inevitably escalate activity to consolidate positions of traditional supplies of natural gas and aggressive marketing of own gas on the part of new players. The other aspect of the issue relates with transit routes, the control of which may dramatically enhance geopolitical potential of any country. At times this results in differences that are typically aggravated by historical, geographic, cultural-religious, and geopolitical antagonism between different subjects in international relations. The situation in the Eastern Mediterranean region provides clear testament. Reconfiguration of the south-eastern energy corridor in the third decade of 21st Century will undoubtedly become one of the most important processes, the outcome of which impact the balance of energy supplies. It shall influence the geopolitical distribution of power in the countries of this region.

The effects of increasing multipolarity in the global order are clearly witnessed in highly geopolitically and geoeconomically contested regions, such as the MENA region where there are more opportunities and fewer externally imposed constraints on local and regional actors. But there are still a lot of high stakes on the allocation of and access to natural resources. This is the role played by geopolitics described by Flint (2017) concerning transforming spaces, places and politics, not only in the physical domain, but in the informational and cognitive domains too. The quest for influence and access to resources as well as attempts to restrict others access to influence and resources has created an empirical situation that has been theoretically predicted (Colin, 2006; Dahrendorf, 1994).

Ankara itself risks to be drawn into a long war. It will be extremely difficult to get out of this war. Therefore Turkey does not have the logistics issues with the Libyan theatre of operations that Russia has in terms of supplies of its armed forces in Syria (Russia critically depends on the Bosphorus Strait controlled by Turkey). However, the very fact that the country would have to maintain a military contingent in Libya may result in strategic risks. (1) Need to sustain permanent military forces to avoid GNA’s defeat; (2) Risk of resource-related strain due to possible intensification of assistance rendered to Khalifa Haftar by, primarily, KSA, UAE, Egypt, and other countries. LNA’s assistance will be difficult to offset by the support of GNA on the part of Turkey, even due to mass relocation of pro-Turkish insurgents from Northern Syria to Libya; (3) Intensification of political-diplomatic standoff with Eastern Mediterranean countries and imposition of additional sanctions against Turkey by the United States and—possibly—the EU.

Turkey leverages its geographic position in order to control the maximum number of pipelines stretching to EU countries from the south-eastern direction. Qatar’s support of Muslim Brotherhood, including those in Libya and Egypt (Barakat, 2014) complements Turkey’s strategy in the region. Since GNA is underpinned by paramilitary units Muslim Brotherhood, it reinforces the positions of Turkey in terms of its prevention of energy projects developed by Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and potentially Egypt. All of this meets Doha’s interests. The escalation in Libya is closely correlated with a rather complex intersection of interests of a wide range of states, at least those in Eastern Mediterranean and MENA. A lot will depend on the result of direct or indirect confrontation in Libya between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand, and KSA, UAE, Egypt and Israel—on the other hand. The nature of reconfiguration of the main gas pipeline system will mostly depend on the fight for one of the European market. Given the current gas supply crisis in Europe leading into the winter of 2021, the issue of the influence of energy security on geopolitical regionalisms in the transforming global order is unlikely to subside soon.
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