

**Transatlantic coordination in the Digital Age:  
US - EU E-diplomacy responses to crises in the Eastern Mediterranean**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction to the topic:**

The Eastern Mediterranean has re-emerged, in the last decade, as one of the most geopolitically contested regions in the European Neighborhood. Long standing disputes over maritime border, competing claims to EEZs, the delivery of offshore energy reverses along with the persistent tensions between states (Greece, Türkiye and Cyprus) have created an environment of recurrent crisis. These dynamics have been intensified by the wider regional instability following the Arab uprisings, the Syrian conflict and the subsequent humanitarian flows towards Europe. In this tense environment, diplomacy increasingly unfolds not only through traditional channels but also via digital platforms. Governments and organizations now use social media and online communication as core instruments and an integrated part of policymaking, crisis management and narrative contestation<sup>1</sup>.

This transformation has placed transatlantic coordination at the forefront of crisis management. Both the United States of America and the European Union have strong stakes in the Eastern Mediterranean. More specifically the US seeks to maintain stability amongst the NATO allies, prevent possible escalation of ongoing disputes and secure energy corridors. The European Union however, is facing more direct implications regarding energy security, migration and regional stability.

Despite the shared axis of interests, the two actors do not always align, more particularly when faced with a fast-moving crisis, where digital messaging plays a central role. This paper will attempt to answer the question: *How effectively have the US and the EU coordinated their digital diplomacy responses in the Eastern Mediterranean, and what does this reveal about the future of transatlantic crisis management?*

## **Chapter 2: Digital diplomacy, The Theoretical and Conceptual Framework.**

Digital transformation has reshaped the ways in which international actors communicate, negotiate and manage crises. The rise of e-diplomacy, the use of digital tools such as social media platforms and digital monitoring systems have become particularly relevant in regions marked by high volatility such as the Eastern Mediterranean. This chapter will outline the conceptual foundations of digital diplomacy, strategic communication and hybrid information threats providing the analytical basis for examining US- EU coordination.

E- diplomacy is commonly defined as the adaptation of traditional diplomatic practices to digital environments. This term encompasses several functions: rapid crisis communication, public diplomacy into the digital sphere, influence in operations and digital intelligence amongst others. Social media platforms such as Twitter (now X) , Facebook, Youtube enable ministries of foreign affairs and international organizations to communicate with domestic audiences, diasporas and international publics in real time<sup>2</sup>. This new reality created both opportunities, by providing greater visibility and faster responsiveness, as well as challenges, with accelerated decision cycles, heightened public scrutiny and vulnerability to misinformation and misinterpretation .

Public diplomacy traditionally aimed to cultivate long term partnerships with foreign publics. Public diplomacy traditionally aimed to cultivate long-term engagement with foreign publics. In the digital age, however, the term broadens<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Seib, P. (2016) *The Future of Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>2</sup>Kinnvall, C. & Nesbitt-Larking, P. (2021) *The Populist Challenge: Crisis, Complexity, and Public Diplomacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup>Manor, I. (2019) *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*. London: Palgrave.

The United States and the EU approach on digital diplomacy is being conducted through different institutional structures. The US operates through centralised bodies, such as the State Department's Global Engagement Center, allowing for relatively coherent messaging<sup>4</sup>. The EU by contrast comprises multiple actors, the European External Action service (EEAS)<sup>5</sup>, the European commission and the individual member states often resulting in overlapping or contradictory narratives. These structural differences shape the degree to which transatlantic partners can coordinate digital responses during fast moving crises.

The Eastern Mediterranean is increasingly subject to hybrid information pressures. Regional actors, including Russia, Türkiye and various non state groups use digital platforms to frame maritime disputes and justify military actions. Disinformation campaigns can undermine collective efforts for resolution, by creating alternative “facts” creating confusion. For both actors, managing these challenges requires shared digital intelligence, rapid fact-checking mechanisms and narrative alignment.

### **Chapter 3: A Brief Historical Background: US–EU Standing in the Eastern Mediterranean**

The contemporary dynamics of US–EU coordination in the Eastern Mediterranean cannot be fully understood without examining the historical evolution of transatlantic engagement in the region. Long before digital diplomacy became central to crisis management, the United States and European Union played significant roles in addressing territorial disputes, mediating conflicts, and shaping regional alignments<sup>6</sup>.

During the Cold War, the Eastern Mediterranean was a strategic frontier where NATO sought to contain Soviet influence. The United States maintained a dominant presence, mediating crises between Greece and Turkey, including the Cyprus conflict of 1974. Washington's role as security guarantor often placed it in the position of a “crisis manager”, or a “mediator”. The absence of a unified European foreign policy meant that transatlantic coordination took place primarily through NATO, rather than through a joint US–European political framework.

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent EU enlargement transformed the strategic context of both actors. Greece and Cyprus' incorporation into the European Union intensified EU involvement in maritime and sovereignty disputes, placing Turkey–Greece tensions within the broader framework of EU foreign policy. At the same time, the Middle East saw extensive periods of turmoil that required US–EU cooperation, particularly during the conflicts, with the prime example of the Israeli -Palestinian conflict.

After 2010, three developments reshaped the region and laid the foundation for today's digital diplomacy challenges. First, the discovery of significant natural gas reserves in the Levant Basin, generated competing claims and new energy alliances, notably the Greece–Cyprus–Israel trilateral partnership, in which both the US and EU have shown interest<sup>7</sup>. Second, the Arab uprisings and Syrian civil war produced unprecedented migration flows, humanitarian pressures, and regional fragmentation in areas where transatlantic political messaging became critical. Third, Turkey adopted

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<sup>4</sup> Cook, S. (2021) *The United States and the Eastern Mediterranean*. Washington, D.C.: Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>5</sup> EEAS (2023) *Hybrid Threats and Disinformation in the EU Neighbourhood*. Brussels: EEAS StratCom.

<sup>6</sup> Tocci, N. (2021) ‘The European Union, the United States and the Mediterranean’, *Journal of Mediterranean Politics*, 26(4), pp. 511–528.

<sup>7</sup> Tsakiris, T. (2020) ‘The Geoeconomics of Eastern Mediterranean Gas’, *Mediterranean Politics*, 25(1), pp. 45–66.

a more assertive maritime and regional posture, articulated through the “Blue Homeland” doctrine, increasing tensions with EU member states and complicating US balancing efforts<sup>8</sup>. By the late 2010s until today, the combination of unresolved sovereignty disputes, energy competition, and hybrid threats created a complex environment in which rapid, coordinated digital diplomacy became essential. Both the US and EU recognised the need for more structured approaches to crisis communication, though their responses remained shaped by historical divergences in strategic priorities and institutional design.

At the same time we must highlight the recent transformation of the strategic objectives of both the United States of America and the European Union, as a result of the last US Presidential elections and the European initiative for strategic autonomy. Europe has increasingly turned toward developing a common security culture (CSDP) as global threats multiply and power dynamics shift, highlighting the need for the EU to become a genuine global actor rather than rely on its traditional dependence on the United States. Crises such as the war in Ukraine, COVID-19, and Brexit exposed the Union’s vulnerabilities and led to the adoption of the 2022 Strategic Compass, the most ambitious blueprint for EU security and defence to date. Although progress has been made, including the European Defence Fund, major differences among member states still hinder the EU’s ability to act as a unified security player. The current U.S. presidency, under Donald J. Trump, given his skepticism toward NATO and criticism of Europe as “free riders”, has further underscored Europe’s need to reduce dependency on Washington. Yet internal challenges, from rising right-wing parties to institutional shifts within the EU, continue to complicate the path toward strategic autonomy, making the Union’s own internal coherence its greatest test at the moment.

#### **Chapter 4: Case Studies – US–EU E-Diplomacy During Crises in the Eastern Mediterranean**

This chapter will examine how the US and EU utilised digital diplomacy during major crises in the Eastern Mediterranean. By analysing their online communication, crisis signaling and narrative coordination, we can identify both the potential and limitations of transatlantic alignment. The focus is placed on two recent key incidents: the 2020 Eastern Mediterranean Maritime crisis and the renewed tensions after the humanitarian spillovers in 2023- 2024<sup>9</sup>.

##### **4.1 Case Study 1: The 2020 Eastern Mediterranean Maritime Crisis**

The summer of 2020 marked one of the most serious confrontations between NATO allies Greece and Turkey in decades. Turkey deployed the Oruç Reis seismic research vessel, escorted by naval ships, into waters claimed by Greece and Cyprus as part of their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)<sup>10</sup>. Both sides exchanged accusations and conducted naval manoeuvres, creating the risk of an unintended military incident.

Digital diplomacy became a central arena for shaping international narratives during the crisis. The Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs used Twitter intensively to publish maritime maps, legal arguments, and real-time updates on Turkish activities. These posts were directed not only at domestic publics but also at international partners, including the US and EU. Turkey likewise employed digital

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<sup>8</sup> Yeşiltaş, M. (2020) ‘Turkey’s Blue Homeland Doctrine and Digital Narratives’, *SETA Report*, pp. 1–22.

<sup>9</sup> Kourtellis, C. (2021) ‘The Eastern Mediterranean Crisis and EU Foreign Policy’, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 32(3), pp. 38–56.

<sup>10</sup>Pierini, M. (2020) *Turkey’s Eastern Mediterranean Challenge to Europe*. Carnegie Europe.

platforms to assert its interpretation of maritime rights, frame Greece as obstructive, and justify its survey activities<sup>11</sup>.

The EU's response initially suffered from fragmentation. While the European External Action Service (EEAS) called for de-escalation, several member states issued separate and sometimes more assertive messages, generating ambiguity about the EU's collective position<sup>12</sup>. Coordinated EU statements emerged more clearly after Germany initiated mediation efforts, and by late summer 2020 the European Council adopted a unified stance calling on Turkey to cease unilateral actions.

The United States communicated through the State Department's digital channels, with messages emphasising restraint and the need for dialogue. However, inconsistencies emerged: while the State Department issued firm statements supporting de-escalation, the White House under the Trump administration conveyed mixed signals, at times giving the impression of neutrality despite NATO allies being involved. This inconsistency evidently weakened the clarity of the US digital stance through its messaging.

The 2020 crisis reveals a plethora of multilayered challenges. First, timing divergences: Greece was highly active digitally, while EU institutions required more time to coordinate responses. Second, narrative competition: Turkey used online messaging aggressively to frame its activities as lawful and defensive, whilst Greece's messaging pipeline was anchored towards communicating the relevant articles and objectives of the Law of the Sea<sup>13</sup>. Third, transatlantic gaps: US and EU digital messages were broadly aligned in tone but not synchronised in timing or emphasis. Nevertheless, finally by late 2020, the US and EU converged around the message of de-escalation, demonstrating the potential for crisis-driven coordination.

#### 4.2 Case Study 2: Tensions and Humanitarian Spillover in 2023–2024

The period of 2023–2024 saw renewed tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, shaped by several overlapping issues: migration flows from the Levant and North Africa, unresolved EEZ disputes, and the regional humanitarian fallout from the Gaza conflict. During the summer months in particular, maritime incidents, irregular arrivals on Greek islands, and naval posturing intensified.

The EU approached these crises with a more structured digital strategy than in 2020. The EEAS and the European Commission used coordinated messaging to address migration surges and maritime disputes. The EU Hybrid Fusion Cell monitored disinformation campaigns targeting humanitarian NGOs and EU institutions, reporting an increase in false narratives portraying Europe as responsible for instability.

EU digital messaging emphasised three main themes:

1. Humanitarian responsibility, focusing on protecting migrants and upholding international law.
2. Energy and maritime security, especially relating to Cyprus' EEZ and offshore exploration rounds.

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<sup>11</sup> Chrysoloras, N. (2020) 'Greek Digital Diplomacy during the Oruç Reis Crisis', *Hellenic Review of International Relations*, 76(2), pp. 15–27.

<sup>12</sup> European Council (2020) *Conclusions on the Eastern Mediterranean*. Brussels: European Council Secretariat.

<sup>13</sup> Chrysoloras, N. (2020) 'Greek Digital Diplomacy during the Oruç Reis Crisis', *Hellenic Review of International Relations*, 76(2), pp. 15–27.

### 3. Rule-of-law framing, often implicitly criticising Turkey's naval activities.

This framing differed from that of the US, which adopted a more security-oriented tone. The United States focused on stability and the security implications of regional spillovers. Digital statements by the US State Department, US embassies in Athens and Ankara, and the US 6th Fleet stressed de-escalation, maritime safety, and preventing further regional destabilisation<sup>14</sup>. The US also issued digital communications about humanitarian access and the need for restraint in relation to the Gaza conflict, which indirectly affected Eastern Mediterranean maritime dynamics.

Unlike in 2020, US messaging in 2023–2024 was more consistent across institutional channels. However, Washington remained cautious in its remarks on Turkey, reflecting broader strategic concerns about NATO cohesion and the need to keep Ankara aligned with Western security interests. Compared to 2020, transatlantic digital coordination during 2023–2024 was better organised, more coherent, and more aligned in narrative tone. However, differences persisted in emphasis: the EU foregrounded legal and humanitarian themes, whereas the US prioritised stability and security. These divergences reflect structural and strategic realities rather than digital coordination failures.

#### **4.4 Conclusions:**

As a final takeaway, we can denote that narrative coordination among both actors has noticeably improved, with the shift from 2020 to 2023-2024 illustrating a gradual move toward a more aligned and coherent messaging. Nonetheless, structural differences remain significant, as the United States centralised decision making contrasts sharply with the European Union's multilayered diplomatic system, resulting in divergences both in tone, time and strategic emphasis. Nowadays, digital diplomacy has become a significant component of crisis management, with all actors relying on real-time online communication to manage escalation and influence both domestic and international audiences. Since digital coordination is a relatively recent challenge, the full extent of the complications remain to be seen.

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of State (2023) *Press Statements on Eastern Mediterranean Stability*. Washington, D.C.

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