

Eastern Mediterranean: Conflict or Compromise?

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Abstract: The Eastern Mediterranean is one of the hottest issues that has occupied the agenda of both international security and politics lately. The intense competition has entered a new phase with some recent developments and regional competition is rapidly transforming from a matter of overlapping sea claims and natural resources to a more general geopolitical and strategic confrontation. Turkey and Greece are the two major competitors in this drama and both actors have already declared their 'maximalist' positions about their rights, interests and expectations in the Eastern Mediterranean to the international community, especially the UN. The de-escalation discourse of NATO and EU allies of the two sides is overshadowed by a number of biased statements, increasing tensions and the possibility of conflict. Nevertheless, the success lies in diplomacy and expanding alliances. The parties need to get together, restart high level joint meetings to strengthen confidence building measures in order to move forward, and make the energy resources a positive game changer.

Introduction

The long-simmering competition in the Eastern Mediterranean has entered a new phase as 1- recently signed new maritime delimitation agreements, NAVTEX and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) announcements, 2- high-pitched political statements and 3- increasing military exercises have raised the temperature between NATO allies. Regional competition is rapidly transforming from a matter of sharing sea areas and newly discovered natural resources to a more general geopolitical and strategic confrontation. While both Turkey and Greece, the two major actors in this drama, are currently acting in a controlled manner to pursue their goals in this region, their uncompromising diplomacy can result in escalation and conflict very quickly, especially in an environment where historical grievances continue to dominate public discourse. The main issue on the current agenda has become whether this quarrel will be transformed into a conflict with the encouragement and involvement of regional and global actors. Turkey has, from the beginning, attempted to resolve the issue bilaterally with Greece without outside influence. This runs counter to Greece's efforts to solve the issue which has included involving newly established regional alliances as well as the EU in order to internationalize the issue.

The EU and its member states, especially France, need to change their approach and pursue a wider, inclusive deal with Turkey. The EU needs to incrementally agree on the components of this new bargain and, critically, base it on pragmatic engagement with Ankara rather than escalatory measures against it

Both the EU and NATO have a direct stake in the matter, but both remain divided on how to approach it. The EU has a significant interest in upholding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its member countries, securing its own energy interests, and advancing a political resolution to the conflict in Libya to manage refugee and terrorism challenges. For NATO it is an issue of preserving the integrity of the alliance and turning its face towards real external threats. The de-escalation efforts of NATO and EU allies of the two sides is overshadowed by a number of biased statements, increasing tensions and the possibility of conflict.¹ Additionally, the recent US decision to lift the military embargo against the Greek Cypriot Administration (the Republic of Cyprus) has caused extreme concern in Ankara and raised tensions to a higher level.² One way or another, the issue is of a high priority for the EU which should be better equipped to de-escalate the crisis. The EU and its member states, especially France, need to change their approach and pursue a wider, inclusive deal with Turkey. The EU needs to incrementally agree on the components of this new bargain and, critically, base it on pragmatic engagement with Ankara rather than escalatory measures against it.

The Course of the Developments

Looking at the course of the developments and the latest stage, both sides have already declared their 'maximalist' positions about their rights in the Eastern Mediterranean to the international community, especially the United Nations, and clearly expressed their objections to the opposing side's position. During this course of events, Athens on the one hand, despite the support of France and Egypt, was unable to obtain its desired change in Turkey's attitude. Ankara, on the other hand, is facing a strategic front that is expanding and consolidating day by day. The fact that each side has substantial domestic support and that both sides cannot be brought to the negotiating table to reach a solution through constructive dialogue unfortunately introduces the possibility of conflict. In short, instead of engaging in constructive talks or bargaining behind the scenes, both parties have steadfastly maintained their positions through harsh rhetoric. There seems to be a desire to teach the other side a lesson, rather than a genuine push to find solutions through dialogue.³ Add in the ineffective and sometimes inflammatory approach from potential mediators in the EU and the United States and the issue becomes even more worrying.

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Turkey and Greece's arguments over territorial sea and air disputes is not new. Although there were some hopeful developments between the two after the 1999 Adapazarı earthquake in Turkey, such as holding exploratory talks, bilateral political negotiations have always been inconclusive.⁴ Differences in the perception of the issues and high expectations from time to time carried the parties to the stage of 'conflict' or even war, as in the Kardak/Imia example.⁵

The latest round of tensions was triggered by the discovery of new natural gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2015.⁶ Although at the beginning Greece preferred to stay away from the arising conflict in which the Greek Cypriot Administration is at the center by presenting it as a Cyprus issue, it was clearly seen that the parties were keen on the continuation of the escalation. The active and aggressive regional approach used by the Greek Cypriot Administration (GCA) and the rapprochement between Israel and the GCA were developments that Greece closely followed but defended that it should be evaluated under the umbrella of the EU.

Meanwhile, the largest natural gas deposit in the Mediterranean has recently been discovered exclusively inside of Egypt's EEZ. This has raised the stakes in the Eastern Mediterranean energy game through the involvement of French and Italian energy companies and energy cooperation with Israel and Cyprus while excluding and thus angering Turkey.⁷ Italy's ENI, which undertakes the exploration and production of Egyptian resources off the coast of Cyprus, combined Egyptian, Greek Cypriot and Israeli gas to reduce costs and transport it as liquefied natural gas (LNG) to international markets via Egypt. French energy giant Total also entered the equation jointly with ENI in 2018 in projects off the coast of Cyprus. In response, new energy agreements signed by Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt for the liquefied natural gas (LNG) project⁸, military cooperation that support these, and the new Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), left Turkey feeling excluded and threatened by the new regional groupings.⁹ This, compounded by other regional effects, has caused Ankara to feel isolated. Turkey's relations with Israel have deteriorated, links with Egypt have been severed, relations with Syria and Iraq reduced to the fight against terrorism, all while disagreements are souring relations with the EU and United States.

What Turkey Wants?

For Turkey, the Eastern Mediterranean has never been only related with energy or gas. The primary issue is how maritime zone delimitation has been a source of conflict in the region. Consequently, Turkey's sovereign rights in its continental shelf as well as protection of Turkish Cypriots' equal rights are at stake. This perspective brings us to the concept of Blue Homeland or *Mavi Vatan* which is defined as Turkey's ambitious plan for geopolitical supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Originally coined and defined by Admiral (Rt.) Cem Gürdeniz and Cihat Yaycı, *Mavi Vatan* is the symbol of Ankara's current Mediterranean strategy. This strategy rests on the pillars to define, safeguard and develop Turkey's maritime rights and national interests in the 21st century regarding the areas of maritime jurisdiction (the territorial waters, the continental shelf and the EEZ). Additionally, *Mavi Vatan* encompasses secondary doctrines such as the deployment of the navy, the development of a defense industry, the use of seismic research vessels and drilling rights, the development of support bases for the national and foreign fleet, and legal instruments and arguments for signing boundary agreements with other seaboard states.¹⁰

Secondly the current regional geopolitical developments, namely the emergence of a local anti-Turkey club such as the EastMed Gas Forum (EMGF) established in Cairo in January 2019, joining Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine, forced Turkish decision makers to add gunboat diplomacy to its agenda. The Turkish government (with strong public backing) has long suffered from a chronic siege mentality, believing itself to be surrounded by hostile forces that threaten its core interests. The current dramatic political transformation in Turkey's imminent neighborhood was also a catalyst. Turkish elite perceived rising security challenges as a threat to Turkey's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Existing problems became more acute as new variables entered into the equation like the discovery of new hydrocarbon reserves or the civil war in Syria. The formation of the EMGF appears to be one concrete sign to justify such concerns. Increased cooperation between Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt, as well as key energy companies from Italy and France has grown to encompass Italy itself, Jordan, and Palestine, with the creation of the EMGF. Noticeably absent is Turkey.

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Thirdly, energy policy, which has been an integral part and even a determinant of both Turkish foreign and security policies, has also been negatively affected. The developing energy alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean has threatened to upend Turkey's energy policy, of which the primary goal has been to maintain Turkey's position as an energy hub between the east-west and north-south corridors.¹¹ Turkey's belief that there was no alternative to the Turkish route in transporting Eastern Mediterranean gas by pipeline to the European market was suddenly shattered. Further, this reality sets back a solution in Cyprus as well as the fundamental rights and interests of the Turkish republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) forcing Turkish decision makers out of their complacency. By this point, however, Turkey had already been removed from the equation and the Greek Cyprus-Egypt-Israel-Greece front left Turkey behind diplomatically. Even though Turkey upped its rhetoric after this stage, the small actors of the region, with the support of France and Italy as well as the US, joined the front perceived to be against Turkey albeit with different motivations. Turkey's absence is a serious concern for the region because of Turkey's overlapping maritime claims, vast domestic market, and potential as a transit route for eastern Mediterranean gas exports. This forum has received the backing of the US as well as the EU whose relationship with Turkey remains strained due to divergences on a growing number of issues. As a result, Turkish foreign policy, which tried relying more on soft power elements in the 2000s, radically shifted to a more aggressive position including sending troops to Syria and Libya as well as muscle flexing in the Mediterranean.

Libya Agreements and Afterwards

Turkey's most recent diplomatic, military, and legal moves with Libya should be viewed within this context. Ankara believes that, with the newly signed agreements with Libya and deployment of military force in Libya, Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean border expanded westward and the country increased global visibility of its maritime grievances. The question is how much this visibility and activity has actually helped resolve Eastern Mediterranean disputes.¹²

Ankara and the internationally recognized Libyan government struck a partnership agreement on a maritime boundary in November 2019, which created an EEZ that cuts across Greek and Greek Cypriot interests. Turkey has also recently applied for licenses to start drilling off

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the coast of Libya. As a result, Eastern Mediterranean energy issues are linked to much broader geopolitical issues and Libyan and Syrian conflicts are brought closer together. The Turkish military has deployed to the eastern and western borders of a designated area within the Mediterranean giving Turkey the ability to cement its position in the Mediterranean.

Greece's frustration and arguably reckless reactions to the Turkey-Libya agreement seem to have quickly transformed into a more coherent strategy. Appealing to EU solidarity, difficult when EU states bordering the Mediterranean seldom agree, Greece found a willing ally in France's aggressive lobbying.¹³ Although Ankara claims that France is using Greece as a springboard to pursue Paris' own objectives in the region¹⁴, the EU's actions clearly meet Athens' expectations at least in the short term.

Turkish decision makers interpret this as Greece acting unilaterally and trying to internationalize the issue by arguing that it is an EU issue. Greeks are expecting, with the absence of Turkey from within the internal decision making processes in the EU, the EU would take a tougher stance against Turkey in line with the Greek expectations. Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias has even suggested that the "the escalation of Turkish aggression" is directed at the EU.¹⁵ Macron's France is the main supporter of this approach in the EU and this position is harshly criticized by Erdoğan as being non-constructive. As a result, Turkey now sees France as incapable of neutrally arbitrating the dispute. France's efforts and Greece's heated rhetoric intended to compelling Turkey will fall short of causing any actual change in Turkey's current stance. The EU lost its leverage over Turkey long ago.

Throughout July and August, both parties have taken steps to increase tensions rather than relieve them. Turkey's Navtex declaration to Greece on July 21 and its deployment of eighteen ships, leading Greece to mobilize its warships, further escalated the situation.¹⁶ German mediation ended with a declaration from Cairo on August 6 that Greece and Egypt had signed an Exclusive Economic Zone Agreement.¹⁷ Turkey continues to conduct exploration activities in a wide area in the Eastern Mediterranean from the west to

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the east. Turkey maintains that these activities are justified as a country whose Mediterranean coast is longer than the US-Mexico border and argues that any action taken in the Eastern Mediterranean without consulting Turkey and without taking into account the rights and interests of Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community would be ethically and legally invalid.

Finally, Turkey became extremely dissatisfied after the statement by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was thought to assume a constructive role during Germany's presidency of the Council of the EU, that "all European Union countries are obliged to support Greece on the Eastern Mediterranean issue", stating after that she had "dealt with the issue in depth" with French President Macron.¹⁸ Ankara had previously thought that Berlin understood the sensitivity of the issue as during German Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas' visits to Athens and Ankara, he evaluated the dispute as 'playing with fire' and that the slightest spark would result in a great disaster.

This quarrel, centered around Greece and Turkey, is also a serious concern for NATO as both are members of the military alliance. Turkey especially has leverage in NATO's safety and security mechanisms, despite doubts around NATO and Western security cooperation mechanism. Fears of a confrontation between the NATO members have been growing. The possibility of any conflict is seen by many as the beginning of the end of NATO. The fact that Macron continued to reiterate his criticism aimed at the United States and Turkey at the end of 2019 with reference to Syria that 'we are experiencing the brain death of NATO' following the developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, results in keeping the collective security and Eastern Mediterranean on the agenda.¹⁹ The United States' combativeness with NATO coupled with the possibility of a Greece-Turkey conflict could at the very least lead to significant structural changes within the security alliance. Thus, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg is mediating with Greek and Turkish leaders, encouraging the two allies to enter into technical talks through NATO in order to establish mechanisms for deescalation in the eastern Mediterranean.

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Conclusion

For both Turkey and Greece, the current disputes over newly discovered resources and delimitation of continental shelves and EEZ's has emerged as a key priority. Developments in July and August turned the issue into a multi-dimensional and complex one. Statements similar to Erdogan's that "we cannot tolerate those who try to take the discussions out of their own sphere and turn them into a wedge...we are focused on protecting our rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya and the Aegean to the fullest"²⁰ are heard in Greece as well. If diplomatic initiatives continue to fail, then escalating tensions will end up in conflict. Despite never wavering from the justifications of their actions, the most rational course for Greece and Turkey is to pursue compromise rather than conflict. There is no other way than to take diplomatic steps with the necessary flexibility that include fast transformations and close monitoring of diplomatic maneuvers. Ankara should take a page from Greece's book and attempt to bolster its own diplomatic front on this issue. Ankara should build on the results achieved in Libya, where its diplomatic initiatives have changed the approaches of many actors. Nevertheless, current efforts and rhetoric based on coercing Turkey is very short-sighted and bound to be ineffective. Lastly, the call from Germany for direct talks between Greece and Turkey to de-escalate tension and resolve disputes over maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean is in line with Turkish approach. The current Turkish strategy is essentially to bring Greece to the negotiation table and avoid conflict. If conflict becomes unavoidable, it is very important to be on the right side legally and politically. Thus if Greece is willing to negotiate with Turkey, it is the time. The parties need to get together; they should restart joint meetings between naval commanders and defence ministers to strengthen confidence building measures to move forward and to tackle the wider issue of energy resources. Success lies in diplomacy and expanding alliances.

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