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The East Mediterranean and Regional Security: A Transatlantic Trialogue

BEYOND ENERGY:

The Geopolitical Determinants of Turkey's Mediterranean Policy

Tolga Demiryol



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INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Mediterranean has recently emerged as one of the hottest conflict zones in the world. It has everything one would need for a nail-biting thriller: energy reserves, international companies, reckless leaders, and battleships trying to outmaneuver each other in close quarters. In many ways, the Mediterranean case looks like yet another maritime conflict, where actors with opposing legal claims compete over the distribution of resources. Historically, such maritime disputes are often resolved through negotiation, compromise, and sometimes referral to international courts. However, the distinctive feature of the Mediterranean case is the complexity and intensity of the geopolitical rivalries that accompany the energy disputes, which in turn has led to conflict escalation and entrenchment.

While the Mediterranean drama has a large cast, Turkey has surely one of the leading roles. Ankara regularly conducts seismic research operations in the disputed territorial waters of the Mediterranean. Turkish research vessels are often accompanied by naval escorts, which in several instances has resulted in close calls at sea. Turkey is also seeking a stronger naval presence, supported by an ambitious initiative of shipbuilding and modernization. Rejecting accusations of gunboat diplomacy, Ankara says it is committed to dialogue. Ankara's unique blend of drilling, diplomacy, and deterrence, however, has drawn criticism from rivals and allies alike. The EU has repeatedly warned Ankara to respect the sovereignty of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) and Greece. The US, while not keen on reasserting itself into the region, has also been quietly critical of Turkey's actions.

What is driving Turkey's increasingly assertive Mediterranean policy? Ankara is undoubtedly keen on getting its share of the region's energy riches. Despite its recent gains in the diversification of natural gas imports, Turkey still suffers from energy import dependence. Even at limited volumes, Mediterranean gas reserves would be a welcome addition to Turkey's import portfolio, if only to increase Ankara's leverage against existing suppliers like Russia. Ankara has also long pursued the position of a regional energy hub, which will require the ability to attract gas imports from multiple regions.

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Yet it is not energy security, but rather geopolitical considerations that principally drive Ankara's Mediterranean strategy. While competition over energy reserves and transit routes plays a key role, its impact is mediated through the geopolitical dynamics of the region. The chief proposition here is that rather than an upfront "energy grab," Turkey's policy is best understood as a response to perceived threats to its maritime sovereignty, as well as a product of an increasingly pervasive perception of regional isolation and encirclement.



Turkey's drillship YAVUZ. (muratart/Adobe Stock)

This paper's analysis proceeds in two sections. The first section discusses two interrelated issues that have shaped Ankara's decidedly securitized Mediterranean outlook: maritime delimitation disputes and the divided status of Cyprus. The second section focuses on recent shifts in regional alignments, most notably the emergence of a regional bloc consisting of Israel, the RoC, Greece, and Egypt. It is this latter development that has paved the way for the perception that Turkey is being excluded from the emergent regional order. To evade this geopolitical predicament of encirclement and isolation, Turkey has adopted a posture of "forward defense," which relies on hard power instruments coupled with an assertive diplomacy to extend control over cross-border areas.

MARITIME DELIMITATION AND CYPRUS ISSUES

The question of maritime borders precedes the onset of the Mediterranean gas bonanza. Throughout the 2000s, several littoral states signed bilateral EEZ delimitation agreements in preparation for hydrocarbon exploration. In 2003, the RoC signed an EEZ delimitation agreement with Egypt, followed by national legislation in 2004 unilaterally designating a Cypriot EEZ. Ankara objected, but did so relatively quietly so as not to jeopardize EU accession negotiations at the time. In 2007, the RoC signed an EEZ deal with Lebanon, which was again protested by Ankara on the grounds that it violated the sovereign rights of both Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).¹ The RoC

¹ TRNC is only recognized by Turkey.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, at the TCG Kinalıada (F- 514) Commissioning Ceremony. (msb.gov.tr)

government also designated 13 drilling blocks to be licensed, five of which Ankara claims to be overlapping with the Turkish continental shelf. In 2010, shortly before the discovery of the Leviathan gas field, Israel and the RoC signed an EEZ agreement. Ankara, once again, protested vociferously.

Turkey's diplomatic objections to the bilateral maritime delimitation agreements by third parties rely on the proposition that the Mediterranean is a semi-enclosed sea and all littoral states with a vested interest should be involved in delimitation agreements.² Ankara, therefore, advocates for a multilateral approach to resolving the region's outstanding border issues. However, in the absence of a multilateral solution, Turkey also pursues the bilateral track of signing maritime demarcation deals with its few remaining

regional allies, such as the 2011 continental shelf agreement with the TRNC and the 2019 EEZ agreement with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya.

Ankara's concerns over its maritime sovereignty intersect with Turkey's historical role as the guarantor of the rights of Turkish Cypriots. Given the division of the island, Ankara holds that Cypriot natural resources, including any seabed riches, belong to both communities. The Turkish government also insists that the RoC government cannot unilaterally demarcate maritime borders, issue licenses, or otherwise monetize natural gas until there is a mechanism for revenue sharing between the two communities.³ The Greek Cypriot side does not in principle reject that Turkish Cypriots are entitled to have their share. However, the RoC government insists

² "From Rep. of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs," Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed August 14, 2020, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-181_-5-august-2011_-press-release-regarding-the-greek-cypriot-administration_s-gas-exploration-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean.en.mfa.

³ Ayla Gürel and Laura Le Cornu, "Can Gas Catalyse Peace in the Eastern Mediterranean?," *The International Spectator* 49, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2014.906799>.



Port of Famagusta in Northern Cyprus
(A.Savin/Wikimedia Commons)

that it has an inalienable right to develop such resources even in the absence of a political agreement.

The turning point in the dispute over drilling rights in Cypriot waters was Sept. 19, 2011, when the RoC initiated drilling in Block 12 (the Aphrodite gas field). Ankara responded by signing a continental shelf delimitation agreement with TRNC the next day. The TRNC issued drilling licenses to the Turkish Petroleum Corporation in areas that partially overlap with the 13 blocks licensed by the RoC. To this day, these overlapping blocks constitute the principal source of dispute in Cyprus.

It was during these earlier stages of the dispute that Ankara started testing out the tactical use of seismic research and drilling platforms as a bargaining instrument. Often escorted by naval elements, survey vessels raise the stakes in the conflict, thus increasing Ankara's leverage. As these expeditions are announced through the publicly available

NAVTEX system, they create audience costs for Ankara, facilitating credible signaling of Turkish preferences. On several occasions, however, Turkey's seismic research operations have created serious diplomatic consequences. For instance, in 2014, UN-mediated talks in Cyprus were interrupted by the Greek side when a NAVTEX was issued for a Turkish vessel to carry out a seismic survey offshore of Cyprus. In July 2017, Turkey dispatched naval vessels to track the drillship commissioned to operate in Cypriot Block 11, disputed by Turkey. In February 2018, tensions flared when an ENI drillship sailing from Block 6 was intercepted by Turkish warships, resulting in a brief standoff. In August 2020, Turkish and Greek navies were mobilized as both sides issued opposing NAVTEX messages for the waters near the Greek island Kastellorizo (Meis), about two kilometers off the coast of Turkey. A major naval escalation was avoided through Germany's mediation.

GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

Over the past decade, many expressed hopes that energy resources would bring not only prosperity, but also peace to the region.⁴ Unfortunately, these expectations have so far failed to materialize. However, shared economic interests succeeded in bringing closer Israel, the RoC, Greece, and Egypt. Given the relatively limited size of the discoveries, Israel and the RoC explored various options to jointly develop and export the gas. Egypt, initially more of a silent partner of the so-called “energy triangle”⁵ would assume a greater leadership role later with the major gas field discovery in the Zohr field in 2015.

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While the shared interests in the monetization of gas provided an economic rationale for cooperation, the convergence of security interests also facilitated the realignment. Israel, which had long kept its distance from the RoC so as not to jeopardize its relationship with Ankara, was ready to consider new partnerships following the Mavi Marmara incident that severed ties with Turkey in 2010. Greece and the RoC welcomed closer relations with Israel as a means of containing Turkey’s growing regional influence. And most importantly, the regional rivalry between Turkey and Egypt under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi provided an additional impetus for the quadrilateral partnership. Even though it falls short of a formal military alliance, the quadrilateral partnership does extend into the area of security cooperation, including several joint military exercises and bilateral defense cooperation agreements.

Close cooperation among Greece, the RoC, and Israel raised Turkey’s threat perception toward the Mediterranean, reinforcing Ankara’s highly securitized perspective of the region. Unable to enlist any regional allies to counter perceived threats, Ankara opted for internal balancing, i.e. increasing its military capabilities. On numerous occasions, Turkish Navy commanders emphasized that defending Turkey’s interests in the Eastern Mediterranean was the highest priority, which would in turn necessitate greater power projection capabilities for the Turkish Navy. As part of the efforts to build a blue-water navy, Ankara fast-tracked various domestic programs, including the National Warship Project (MILGEM). Under MILGEM, Turkey has developed at least 15 multipurpose

4 Isabelle Ioannides, “Gas Resources in the Eastern Mediterranean,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, November 1, 2012), <http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2170105>; Emre Iseri and Panagiotis Andrikopoulos, “Energy Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Will Aphrodite’s Lure Fuel Peace in Cyprus?,” *Ortadogu Analiz (Middle Eastern Analysis)* 5, no. 51 (2013): 37–46; Chrysostomos Pericleous, “Cyprus: A Last Window of Opportunity?,” *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 1 (2012): 93–108.

5 George Stavris, “The New Energy Triangle of Cyprus-Greece-Israel: Casting a Net for Turkey?,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (2012): 87–102.



TCG Anadolu (L-400) amphibious assault ship (LHD) during its construction in Istanbul, Turkey. (2020Istanbul/Wikimedia Commons)

corvettes and frigates, significantly extending its littoral warfare capabilities. The national submarine project (MILDEN) aims to develop and build six submarines by 2030. Turkey's first Amphibious Assault Ship (LHD), *TCG Anadolu*, is expected to be completed in 2020. Originally conceived to operate F-35 combat aircraft, the LHD is a blue-water asset that will increase Ankara's power projection capabilities in the Mediterranean.

Ankara's heightened perception of threat is reflected in the prevalence of the notion of *Mavi Vatan*, "Blue Homeland," in the Turkish security discourse. Coined by a high-ranking Navy officer in 2006, the term originally signified Ankara's maritime claims in the Mediterranean. Over the past four years, Blue Homeland has gained traction both in decision-making circles and public discourse.⁶ However, Blue Homeland is not a novel notion. It recycles the security-oriented outlook of Turkish foreign policy in the 1990s,

mixing it with frequent references to potent historical imagery, such as the bitter memory of the *Treaty of Sèvres*, the Treaty that the victorious powers in World War I failed to impose upon the Ottoman Empire. Linking up with the Eurasianist strands of thought prevalent among Turkey's security elites, the Blue Homeland doctrine celebrates multipolarity and charts a course of leadership for Turkey in the Mediterranean and beyond. It is too early to conclude that Blue Homeland has become the national security doctrine of Turkey. Indeed, its current popularity reflects the domestic coalition dynamics that brought closer secular nationalist elites with the Justice and Development Party after the failed coup attempt in 2016. Nonetheless, the Blue Homeland doctrine is increasingly popular, as evidenced by the frequent references to the concept in official discourse.⁷

6 İlhan Uzgel, "The 'Blue Homeland' and Turkey's New Forward Defence Doctrine," 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/columns/2020/06/25/the-blue-homeland-and-turkeys-new-forward-defence-doctrine/>.

7 "Erdoğan'dan 'Mavi Vatan' Vurgusu - Haberler," accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/erdogandan-mavi-vatan-vurgusu-6316092>; "Cumhurbaşkanı Yardımcısı Oktay'dan 'Mavi Vatan' Mesajı," accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-yardimcisi-oktaydan-mavi-vatan-mesaji/1938411>.

Two recent developments have reinforced Ankara's perceptions of threat and deepened the sense of encirclement. The first is the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in January 2019. Headquartered in Cairo, the EMGF consists of the RoC, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt. The EMGF is also supported by France and the United States, which requested to join the organization as a member and a permanent observer, respectively. The second key development is the signing of the EastMed Pipeline Accord in January 2020 by Greece, the RoC, and Israel. The EastMed pipeline would connect Mediterranean gas fields directly to Europe. Ankara considers both the EMGF and the EastMed pipeline elements of a larger effort to box Turkey to the margins of the Mediterranean. The fact that the EMGF, the EastMed pipeline, and other regional initiatives are being supported by the US and the EU further contribute to the conviction that Turkey is being sidelined by its allies.

TURKEY'S SENSE OF ISOLATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN OVERLAP WITH ANKARA'S FRUSTRATIONS IN TERRITORIAL CONFLICTS, MOST NOTABLY IN SYRIA AND LIBYA.




Turkish Naval and Land forces conducting training in the Eastern Mediterranean in early 2020. (dzkk.tsk.tr)

It is important to note that Turkey's sense of isolation in the Mediterranean overlap with Ankara's frustrations in territorial conflicts, most notably in Syria and Libya. Due to the overwhelming military presence of Russia in Syria since late 2015, Turkey's influence on the ground has been limited. Ankara has also been involved in the Libyan conflict, initially to protect its economic interests, including substantial business contracts granted by the GNA. Determined to break through the perceived encirclement of Turkey's interests across the Mediterranean, Ankara signed a security cooperation agreement with the GNA in November 2019, facilitating the supply of military equipment and personnel. Turkey's involvement, particularly the apparent effectiveness of domestically produced unmanned aerial vehicles, rebalanced the battlefield and secured GNA's survival. Along with the security cooperation agreement, Ankara and GNA signed a maritime delimitation agreement, which established two EEZs that partially overlap with the areas claimed by Greece. The deal also blocks the path of the EastMed pipeline. Both aspects of Turkey's involvement in Libya have been celebrated in Ankara as critical gains towards tilting the Mediterranean balance of power in Turkey's favor.


POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The Mediterranean is at an impasse. Gas discoveries over the past decade have largely failed to meet the expectations that they would bring peace and prosperity to the region. Given low energy prices, it remains a challenge to attract financing for costly export infrastructure. More importantly, disputes over maritime borders not only hamper exploration, but also raise the probability of region-wide conflict. As maritime disputes overlap with regional rivalries, it is conceivable that tensions could spiral into open confrontation.

To de-escalate tensions, it is imperative to unpack the interests of the key actors in the conflict. This article suggested that Turkey's actions in the region are best explained as a reaction to an increasingly prevalent perception that there is a new geopolitical order emerging in the Mediterranean and Turkey is being excluded. Some policy implications follow:




European sanctions on Turkey will likely be ineffective, as they will further exacerbate Ankara's threat perceptions and possibly create a rally-around-the-flag effect.




De-escalation of tensions between Greece and Turkey is a necessary, yet ultimately insufficient, step. Given the involvement of a multitude of regional interests, a multilateral effort is warranted.



The exclusion of Turkey from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum has been a major driver of Turkey's concerns. Regional energy cooperation platforms will need to be inclusive.



Normalization of Turkey-Israel ties would help further defuse regional tensions. This would, however, require a substantial recalibration of security policies, particularly in the area of counter-terrorism cooperation.

Any sustainable political solution in the Mediterranean will eventually need to involve a dialogue between Turkey and Egypt. While reconciliation between Ankara and Cairo appears improbable at this point, the two regional powers need to devise mechanisms to effectively manage their rivalry. 

About the Author

Tolga Demiryol is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Altınbaş University. He is also Director of the Center for Research on Energy and Environment at the same institution. He received his PhD at the University of Virginia, specializing in political economy. Demiryol published widely on Turkish Foreign Policy, theories of economic interdependence and geopolitics of energy. In 2018-2019 he was a Fung Global Fellow at Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies.

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