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The East Mediterranean and Regional Security: A Transatlantic Trialogue

# IS THE ATLANTIC PACT SINKING IN THE DEEP EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN?

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The transatlantic alliance has periodically experienced deep divisions and diplomatic crises. The current situation in the Eastern Mediterranean seems to add one more such episode to its tumultuous history. Ever since the discovery of offshore hydrocarbons off the coast of Cyprus in 2011, the Eastern Mediterranean has experienced enhanced geostrategic competition. In 2012, Turkey started onshore drilling for oil and gas in the northern part of Cyprus, recognized by Turkey as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).<sup>1</sup> Since then, it has intermittently engaged in hydrocarbon explorations in the region, drawing heavy criticism for its gunboat diplomacy and display of military power at sea, based on a much-debated “Blue Homeland” (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine for its maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup>

The unresolved Cyprus problem is a major contributor to the increasingly ambitious foreign policy of Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean. When Turkey first started drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean, it initially aimed to put pressure on the government of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) with regard to reaching a negotiated settlement with Turkish Cypriots for sharing the profits from natural resources. Turkey’s awareness of its increased isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean is yet another contributor to its foreign policy in the region. To illustrate, in December 2018, the agreement concluded between Cyprus and Egypt declared their intentions to construct a pipeline connecting Egypt’s liquefied natural

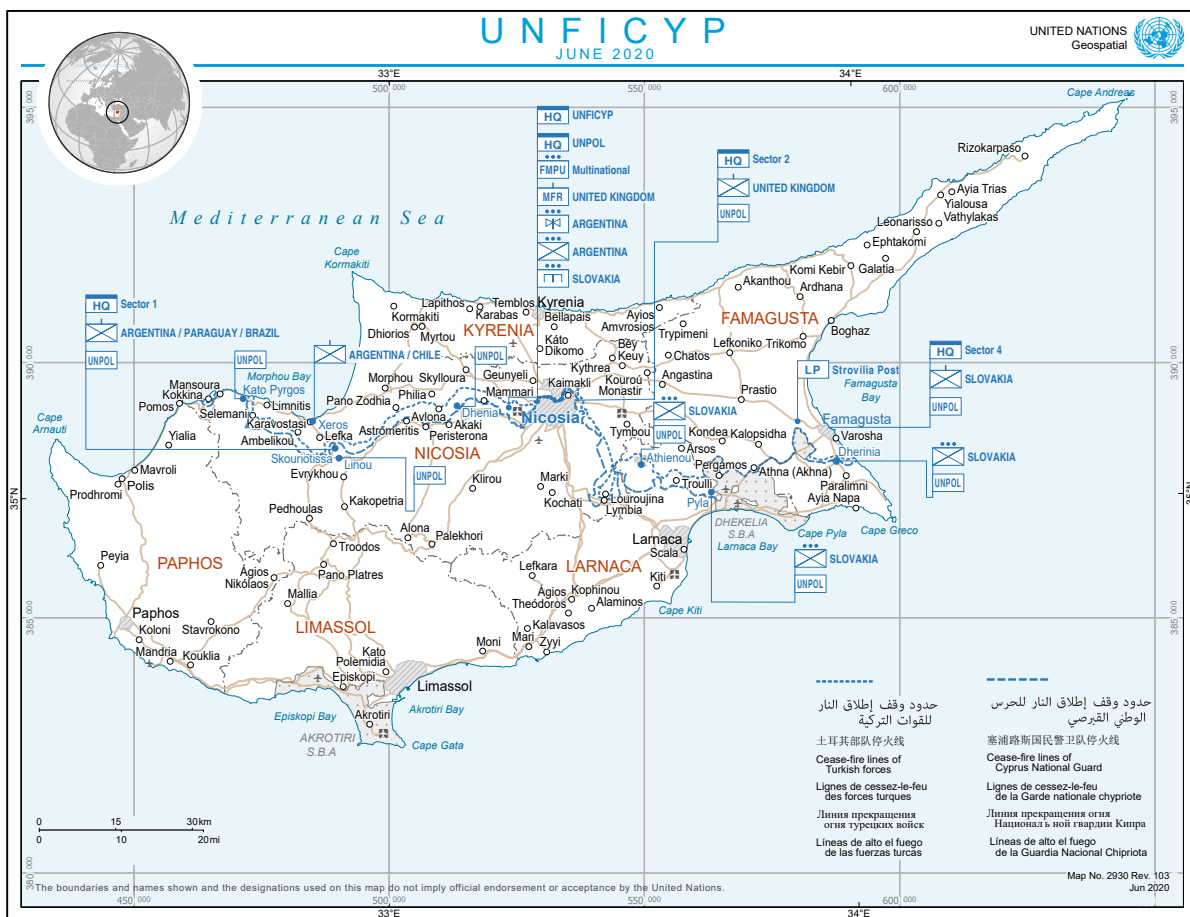
## THE UNRESOLVED CYPRUS PROBLEM IS A MAJOR CONTRIBUTOR TO THE INCREASINGLY AMBITIOUS FOREIGN POLICY OF TURKEY IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN.

gas facilities to Cyprus’s Aphrodite field. In January 2019, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum was created between the RoC, Greece, Italy, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority, in order to develop a regional natural gas market. In February 2019, ExxonMobil made an announcement of a new natural gas discovery in offshore Cyprus.<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of January 2020, Greece, the RoC, and Israel signed a trilateral undersea gas pipeline deal, bypassing Turkey. This, in turn, increased the stakes for Turkey’s maritime policies in the region, contributing to the momentum behind its hydrocarbon exploration. Turkey wanted access to natural resources and increased its regional presence in response to its perception of an anti-Turkish coalition appearing in the region. Moreover, Turkey’s unresolved maritime boundaries with Greece and the RoC are an additional factor in explaining the rising tensions in the region.

1 Reuters, “Timeline: Turkey’s Gas Exploration off Cyprus Raises Tensions,” 14 October 2019.

2 Ryan Gingeras, “Blue Homeland: The Heated Politics behind Turkey’s New Maritime Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, 2 June 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/blue-homeland-the-heated-politics-behind-turkeys-new-maritime-strategy/>.

3 Helena Smith, “Huge Gas Discovery off Cyprus Could Boost EU Energy Security,” *The Guardian*, 28 February 2019.



Map of Cyprus and Northern Cyprus. (United Nations)



The East Med Pipeline would connect the East Mediterranean fields to Europe. (Agenor Energy)

## THE CRUX OF THE PROBLEM GOES BACK TO THE EXISTENCE OF OVERLAPPING CLAIMS FOR TURKEY'S CONTINENTAL SHELF AND THE RoC'S EEZ AND CONTINENTAL SHELF.

It is against this background that Turkey's involvement in the Libyan civil war should be interpreted. The military cooperation and the maritime delimitation agreements Turkey signed with the UN-backed Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) in November 2019 served the needs of both parties. The GNA needed help with the civil war that has gripped the Libyan state after the fall of Muammar Qadhafi in 2011. Turkey's deal with the GNA served as a spoiler for the hydrocarbon exploration and transportation efforts in the Eastern Mediterranean, as it increased the risks involved in energy companies' investments in the region.<sup>4</sup> Greece, the RoC, Israel, Egypt, and the United States (US) criticized the deal, noting that it violates international law by ignoring the sovereign rights of third states such as Greece. On May 11, 2020, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, France, and United Arab Emirates (UAE) expressed concerns over "continuous provocative actions in the Eastern Mediterranean" and condemned Turkey's drilling in the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as "illegal" according to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).<sup>5</sup> The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized Greece and Cyprus for their lack of engagement in dialogue with Turkey and TRNC and for "relying on irrelevant non-regional actors," and accused them of creating an "axis of malice."<sup>6</sup>

The crux of the problem goes back to the existence of overlapping claims for Turkey's continental shelf and the RoC's EEZ and continental shelf. The RoC, pursuant to UNCLOS, has a territorial sea that extends to 12 nautical miles from the baselines.<sup>7</sup> Turkey is not a party to UNCLOS and does not diplomatically recognize the RoC. There are grave concerns on the part of Turkish elites and the public about Turkey's confinement in the Mediterranean, despite the fact that Turkey has the longest shoreline of all Mediterranean countries. There are also long-lasting maritime disputes between Greece and Turkey on the use of Greek islands in determining the national coastline and the

4 Charlotte Gifford, "Will the Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline Deal Create a Regional Energy Hub?" *EuropeanCEO*, 15 May 2020, <https://www.europeanceo.com/home/featured/will-the-eastern-mediterranean-pipeline-deal-create-a-regional-energy-hub/>.

5 Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Declaration Adopted by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece and the United Arab Emirates," 11 May 2020, <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/state-ments-speeches/joint-declaration-adopted-by-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-cyprus-egypt-france-greece-and-the-united-arab-emirates-11052020.html>.

6 Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "QA-33, 11 May 2020, Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hami Aksoy, in Response to a Question Regarding the Joint Declaration Adopted by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Egypt, Greece, GCA, France and the United Arab Emirates," 11 May 2020, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc\\_-33\\_-gkry-ortak-bildiri-hk-sc.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_-33_-gkry-ortak-bildiri-hk-sc.en.mfa).

7 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cyprus, "The Sea of Cyprus: The International Legal Framework," 2020, [http://www.mfa.gov.cy/mfa/mfa2016.nsf/mfa83\\_en/mfa83\\_en?OpenDocument](http://www.mfa.gov.cy/mfa/mfa2016.nsf/mfa83_en/mfa83_en?OpenDocument).

EEZ. Due to the close proximity of many Greek islands to Turkey's coastline, Turkey risks getting bottled in and losing almost half of its maritime territory and access to deep water resources in the Mediterranean Sea.

Since the future of the Libyan civil war is important for Turkey's strategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey needs to ensure that the Tripoli government survives in order to continue playing the role of a spoiler in energy-related developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, Turkey's involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean diverts public attention away from the economic recession that was exacerbated by the pandemic. Finally, the majority of the Turkish public supports Turkey's actions to defend its maritime rights in the Mediterranean, which gives a free pass to the Turkish government.

## THE MAJORITY OF THE TURKISH PUBLIC SUPPORTS TURKEY'S ACTIONS TO DEFEND ITS MARITIME RIGHTS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN, WHICH GIVES A FREE PASS TO THE TURKISH GOVERNMENT.

Tensions in the region have been further on the rise recently — due to a number of developments such as the naval incident between Turkey and France off the coast of Libya, skirmishes between Turkish and Greek militaries over maritime delimitation around the Greek islands, and the naval involvement of France to support Greece — illuminating deep divisions among North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies. This article, therefore, addresses the impact of the developments in the Eastern Mediterranean on the transatlantic alliance, with a special focus on the crisis in Libya. It makes the argument that the Libyan quagmire adds to the already-difficult relationship between Turkey, Europe, and the United States, while creating certain windows of opportunity to reaffirm the importance of the transatlantic partnership. It first discusses US interests in Libya, followed by how the latest developments in Libya influence trilateral relations between Turkey, the US, and Europe. It provides an overview of the involvement of various European nations in Eastern Mediterranean politics and discusses how the crises in the region have influenced the military partnership between the three parties.

Even though the US was instrumental in leading NATO's operation against Qadhafi in 2011, its current role in the Libya conflict is quite limited.<sup>8</sup> The US seeks to contain the impact of state collapse and resolve the conflict, while simultaneously paying lip service to curbing the intensified foreign intervention in the country, which it argues is serving Russian interests.<sup>9</sup> The US has a number of important strategic interests in the Libya conflict, ranging from counterterrorism, to ensuring the security of Libyan oil and gas, to containing the refugee crisis it creates for allies in Europe, to the protection of weapons

8 Kali Robinson, "Who's Who in Libya's War?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/whos-who-libyas-war>.

9 Christopher M. Blanchard, "Libya: Conflict, Transition, and US Policy," *Congressional Research Service* RL33142, 26 June 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33142.pdf>.



Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, France, and the United Arab Emirates held a teleconference in May, 2020 to discuss concerns with escalations and denounce Turkish exploration activities in violation with international law. (sis.gov.eng)

stockpiles from the Qadhafi era, as well as the containment of Russian influence in the country.<sup>10</sup> Officially, the US supports the GNA, but this support has not translated into military support against the Libyan National Army (LNA).<sup>11</sup>

The same reluctance can also be detected when it comes to intervention in the recent skirmishes between its NATO allies: Turkey, Greece, and France. The US would have been well-advised to pursue its traditional mediation role and to invite the parties to resolve their differences through diplomatic means. However, the Trump administration did not show much interest in mediating between the allies. In fact, the 2018 US-Greece Strategic Dialogue, the US-Greece Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement updated at the beginning of 2020, the recent

high-level US diplomatic visits to Greece and Cyprus, and the US lifting of the arms embargo against the RoC last month might be interpreted as US diplomatic support for Greece and Cyprus.

Any deepening of the crisis between Turkey, Greece, and France would jeopardize the stability of the transatlantic alliance, especially at a time when Western strategic interests require an enhanced dialogue on Belarus, Ukraine, Libya, Iraq, and Syria. NATO has been, therefore, heavily involved in bringing the Turkish and Greek delegations into technical military dialogue with each other. It helped establish a “de-confliction mechanism” in the beginning of October 2020, with the goal of preventing “incidents and accidents at sea or in the air.”<sup>12</sup> Due to the decision to renew the diplomatic process

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Robinson, “Who’s Who in Libya’s War?”

<sup>12</sup> NATO, “NATO Secretary General Discusses Situation in Eastern Mediterranean with President Erdogan,” 23 September 2020, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/178130.htm?selectedLocale=en>.





Delegates from the Republic of Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority met in January, 2019 to create the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum. (energy-sea.gov)

between Turkey and Greece, the EU brought the modernization of the Customs Union Agreement, the Visa Liberalization process, EU-Turkey high-level dialogue, and migration-related issues back into its agenda with Turkey, while noting that other options, such as sanctions, are a possibility in the case of Turkey's renewed unilateral actions in breach of international law.

The civil war in Libya has effectively turned into a proxy war waged by Turkey, Russia, and other actors in the region. France, along with Russia, Egypt, and the UAE, is supportive of Haftar's forces, whereas Turkey, Qatar, and, to some extent, Italy support the GNA.<sup>13</sup> There has been an arms embargo against Libya since 2011, which has been ostensibly undermined by actors such as Turkey, Russia, and France. Acting Special Representative to the Secretary-General Stephanie Williams

warned the United Nations Security Council of "an alarming military build-up as a result of the uninterrupted dispatch by the foreign backers of increasingly sophisticated and lethal weapons" and "the recruitment of more mercenaries to both sides of the conflict," and noted "the flagrant violation of the UN arms embargo" since the LNA offensive against Tripoli on April 4, 2019.<sup>14</sup>

The EU's Operation IRINI, launched in March 2020, has the goal of enforcing the UN sanctions against weapon smuggling to Libya. In June 2020, Turkey committed to helping GNA in its advance to Sirte, and discussed plans for its use of Libyan military facilities.<sup>15</sup> Turkey expressed skepticism about IRINI's objectivity, criticizing the lack of scrutiny of shipments to the LNA.<sup>16</sup> In early June 2020, there was an incident between Turkey and Greece, when the Greek frigate *Spetsai*,

13 Erin Ogunkeye, "France Suspends Role in NATO Naval Mission over Tensions with Turkey," *France24*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200701-france-suspends-role-in-nato-naval-mission-over-turkish-warship-incident>.

14 United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), "Acting SRSG's Oral Update to the 44th Session of the Human Rights Council, Pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolution 40/271," 18 June 2020, <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/acting-srsg%E2%80%99s-oral-update-44th-session-human-rights-council-pursuant-human-rights-council-resolution>.

15 Blanchard, "Libya: Conflict, Transition, and US Policy."

16 Ibid.



In August, 2020, France sent naval vessels in support of Greece following Turkish exploration in disputed waters. (Greek National Defense)

operating under IRINI, was prevented from inspecting a Tanzania-flagged freighter escorted by the Turkish Navy.<sup>17</sup> Following this incident, the EU asked for cooperation with NATO's Operation Sea Guardian, which was launched in 2016 to engage in maritime security capacity building and to provide support to maritime situational awareness and counterterrorism;<sup>18</sup> but to date, there is no formal cooperation between the two missions.

On June 10, 2020, Turkish warships allegedly flashed their radar lights at the French warship *Courbet*, operating in the NATO Sea Guardian Operation, following its attempts to inspect the Turkish cargo ship

*Cirkin* for a suspected violation of the arms embargo.<sup>19</sup> Turkish authorities denied the allegations and insisted that the vessel was carrying humanitarian aid. The investigation by NATO on the incident was "inconclusive," and its findings were not made public.<sup>20</sup> France withdrew from NATO's Sea Guardian Operation following the incident<sup>21</sup> and is now working under IRINI.<sup>22</sup> On June 12, 2020, Turkey conducted the Operation Sea Training exercise in Libya's territorial waters, with the participation of eight frigates and corvettes, along with 17 planes.<sup>23</sup>

While temporary de-escalation was observed afterward, the signing of an agreement between Greece and Egypt in

17 Federico Petrangeli, "Operation IRINI: Can a 'No Longer Naïve' EU Tame the Libyan Conflict?" *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*, 31 July 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/operation-irini-can-no-longer-naive-eu-tame-libyan-conflict-27128>.

18 NATO, "Operation Sea Guardian," 28 March 2020, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_136233.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136233.htm).

19 Ogunkeye, "France Suspends Role in NATO Naval Mission over Tensions with Turkey."

20 Lorne Cook, "EU Sanctions Turkish Firm over Libya Arms Embargo Violations," *The Washington Post*, 21 September 2020.

21 John Irish, "After Turkish Incident, France Suspends Role in NATO Naval Mission," *Reuters*, 1 July 2020, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-libya-security-france-nato-idUKKBN2425FD>.

22 Cook, "EU Sanctions Turkish Firm over Libya Arms Embargo Violations."

23 The Arab Weekly, "Turkey Flexes Muscle in Mediterranean While EU Tries to De-escalate Tensions," 13 June 2020, <https://thearabweekly.com/turkey-flexes-muscle-mediterranean-while-eu-tries-de-escalate-tensions>.

## THE RESOLUTION OF THE LIBYAN CONFLICT HAS IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY, AS IT WOULD SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCE THE FLOW OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES TO EUROPE.

August 2020 on setting up an EEZ renewed tensions. Turkey declared the agreement null and void.<sup>24</sup> In August, French President Emmanuel Macron ordered two Rafale fighter jets and the *La Fayette* frigate into the Eastern Mediterranean and tweeted, “I have decided to strengthen the French military presence temporarily in the Mediterranean, in co-operation with Greece and other European partners.”<sup>25</sup> France also supports Cypriot claims on gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>26</sup> and has been critical of Turkish foreign policy in Syria, especially in the aftermath of Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring. Germany intervened in the situation in order to de-escalate the renewed tensions and managed to convince Turkey and Greece to engage in diplomatic talks.

Nevertheless, the troubles do not end there. In September 2020, the EU found that the Avrasya Shipping company, which operated *Cirkin*, violated the arms embargo by transporting “military material to Libya in May and June 2020.”<sup>27</sup> On Oct. 11, 2020, following the agreement on restarting the exploratory talks between Turkey and Greece, Turkey announced the renewal of its survey activity in disputed areas in the Eastern Mediterranean, which was severely criticized by many NATO allies, including the US, Germany, Greece, and France, as “unilaterally rais[ing] tensions in the region and deliberately complicat[ing] the resumption of crucial exploratory talks.”<sup>28</sup>

All in all, it is possible to argue that the Libya crisis has contributed to the lack of trust between Turkey and the EU, and created additional tensions between Turkey, France, and Greece. Turkey was already alienated from the transatlantic alliance due to developments in Syria and its acquisition of S-400 missile defense systems from Russia. Developments in Libya made it evident that the transatlantic partners do not share a common strategic vision with regard to the future of the region.

The resolution of the Libyan conflict has important implications for European security, as it would significantly reduce the flow of migrants and refugees to Europe. Libya also plays an important role in terms of European

24 Reuters, “Egypt and Greece Sign Agreement on Exclusive Economic Zone,” 6 August 2020.

25 BBC News, “France Sends Jets and Ships to Tense East Mediterranean,” 13 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53767792>.

26 Ibid.

27 Cook, “EU Sanctions Turkish Firm over Libya Arms Embargo Violations.”


28 Morgan Ortogus, “US Response to Turkey’s Renewed Survey Activity in the Eastern Mediterranean,” US Department of State Spokesperson Press Statement, 13 October 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-response-to-turkeys-renewed-survey-activity-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>.

energy security and the economic interests of Italy and France. Moreover, the divergent views presented by Italy and France on the Libyan conflict serve to undermine the reputation of the EU internationally. The EU has vested interest in calming the situation in Libya and in bringing France and Italy together on Libya.<sup>29</sup> The announcement of GNA Prime Minister Fayeze Sarraj's resignation may further complicate the crisis in Libya, as it is uncertain who will succeed him and how his successor will impact Turkish influence, as well as GNA-LNA relations.<sup>30</sup>

After all the maritime disputes, as well as the crises in Syria and Libya, it is reasonable to question whether the US, Turkey, and Europe are still military partners. While tensions are certainly high, Turkey is still interested in maintaining its alliance commitments within NATO. It is cognizant of the fact that it would risk overstretching if these conflicts escalate further.<sup>31</sup> For instance, Turkey recently reaffirmed its interest in purchasing a EUROSAM missile defense system from France, which may be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile with the country following a tense couple of months.

Despite the fact that Turkey and Russia have engaged in rapprochement since 2016, the LNA-GNA conflict has drawn Russia and Turkey "into the conflict on opposing sides, such that they have become key power brokers."<sup>32</sup> The renewed Nagorno-Karabakh conflict adds yet another front where Turkey and Russia support opposing sides. These developments present an important window

of opportunity for transatlantic actors to pull Turkey to their side.

At a time when Turkey's relations with Russia are deteriorating, Turkey might be motivated to find common ground with its transatlantic allies, especially if the recently-announced positive EU agenda is successfully implemented. Finally, the outcome of the US presidential elections will have an important impact on US-Turkey relations. Solidarity and cohesion within the NATO alliance are at stake here. Any public skirmishes and conflict between the allies would serve the hand of Russia. Therefore, the allies should engage in de-escalation in the Mediterranean, while seeking to bring the warring parties in Libya into a negotiated settlement, before the transatlantic alliance sinks into the deep waters of the Mediterranean. 

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29 Tarek Megerisi, "How to Repair Europe's Credibility in Libya?" *European Council on Foreign Relations Commentary*, 16 January 2020, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_how\\_to\\_repair\\_europes\\_credibility\\_in\\_libya3](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_to_repair_europes_credibility_in_libya3).

30 Marc Daou, "UN-backed Libyan PM Sarraj's Mysterious Resignation Announcement," *France24*, 18 September 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200918-un-backed-libyan-pm-sarraj-s-mysterious-resignation>.

31 International Crisis Group, "Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters," Report No. 257, 30 April 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/257-turkey-wades-libyas-troubled-waters>.

32 The International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Domestic Divisions and External Actors in Libya's Civil War," *IISS Strategic Comments*, Volume 26, Comment 21, September 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/~publication/79f588dc-31fb-4575-b536-0115b4fe6401/domestic-divisions-and-external-actors-in-libyas-civil-war.pdf>, 1.

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