

# Trouble with Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean

The discovery of gas in the Eastern Mediterranean has rekindled unresolved issues between Turkey and two EU members, Cyprus and Greece. Steps taken by a more assertive Turkey that fears being cut out of the energy bonanza have precipitated a crisis. An escalation would not only have far-reaching implications for the region, but also for EU-Turkish relations and NATO's cohesion.

By Fabien Merz

The Eastern Mediterranean is a region steeped in history and strategic competition. Over the last few decades, it has seen a number of fissures between Turkey and two EU Member States, Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, due to the unresolved conflict on the island of Cyprus and contested maritime boundaries. With recent discoveries of important gas fields under the seabed and the prospect of finding more, the Eastern Mediterranean has also gained strategic significance as an important source of energy. The discovery of natural gas occurs against the backdrop of a Turkey that is highly dependent on imports for its natural gas and is seeking to diversify its energy sources. However, the new brand of assertive foreign policy that Ankara has adopted over recent years has not only further estranged Turkey from its traditional NATO allies and the EU, but also further strained tense relations between Turkey and other major actors in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly Egypt and Israel. This, in turn, has led Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel, amongst others, to coalesce and cooperate on the exploitation and commercialization of natural gas, fueling Turkish fears of being cut out of the Eastern Mediterranean energy bonanza.



A Turkish drilling vessel is escorted by a Turkish Navy frigate in the Eastern Mediterranean off Cyprus, 6 August 2019. *Murad Sezer / Reuters*

Since 2018, Turkey has thus begun taking assertive steps to secure its claims to what Ankara considers its “fair share” of Eastern Mediterranean energy resources. It has deployed naval expeditions to explore gas fields in waters claimed by the Republic of Cyprus and Greece, blocked exploration vessels operating under Republic of Cyprus licenses, and signed a highly contentious

maritime boundary treaty with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya. These actions have raised alarm across the entire Eastern Mediterranean region, especially in Athens and Nicosia, both of which have been the most affected by recent Turkish actions. Greece and the Republic of Cyprus have since lobbied the EU to impose comprehensive sanctions

against Turkey. Yet, despite having expressed its unequivocal support for Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, disagreement between EU Member States about how to handle a more assertive Turkey have prevented the EU from devising far-reaching sanctions and confronting Turkey more energetically. However, this has not prevented some Member States from acting on their own. France has not only backed calls for more comprehensive EU sanctions against Turkey, but has even dispatched naval forces and organized military exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean together with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus to deter Turkey.

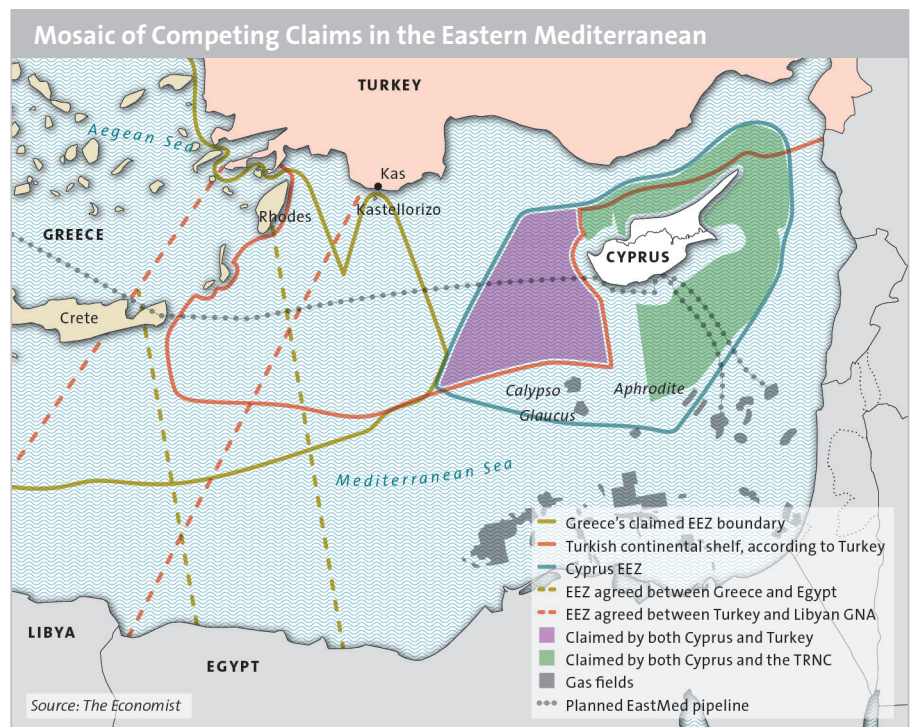
This highly volatile situation has led to several incidents between French, Greek, and Turkish naval vessels, highlighting the risk of a confrontation between NATO members and further straining already severely damaged relations between Turkey and the EU. The Eastern Mediterranean has thus once again become a geopolitical hotspot. An escalation could potentially spiral into a crisis with far-reaching implications for regional stability, as well as for NATO cohesion and the future of EU-Turkish relations.

### Unresolved Conflicts

The Eastern Mediterranean has long been a theater of deep-seated and historically rooted antagonism between Greece and Turkey. Most notably in 1974, when Turkey invaded Cyprus to prevent Greek Cypriots from uniting with Greece and to protect the Turkish Cypriot minority living on the island. The Turkish military intervention resulted in the *de facto* partition

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and ethnic division of the island into the Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). The Republic of Cyprus is culturally and politically close to Greece, internationally widely recognized, a UN member, and a fully-fledged EU member since 2004. By contrast, the TRNC is recognized and backed only by Turkey. Numerous attempts to resolve the conflict on the island of Cyprus, including by the UN, have proven unsuccessful. A UN peacekeeping force, the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), is stationed on the island to this day. This unresolved conflict



generates a plethora of complex issues with far-reaching implications.

One issue that has recently regained in importance due to the discovery of gas fields around Cyprus' coast relates to the island's so-called exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Normally, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea grants states EEZs, zones that give exclusive rights to maritime resources 200 nautical miles or approximately 370 km from their baselines, typically the low-water line of their coasts. Ankara argues that Turkish Cypriots have "undeniable rights" to the Cypriot EEZ, a claim rejected by the Republic of Cyprus, its Greek ally, and the EU as they do not recognize the TRNC as a sovereign entity. This has resulted in competing claims to the island's EEZs (see map). Despite these unresolved issues, the Republic of Cyprus has established the practice of selling licenses to private companies to explore and exploit the natural gas within the island's EEZ.

In addition, a long-standing dispute exists between Greece and Turkey about how the maritime boundaries of Greek islands adjacent to Turkey ought to be drawn in the Aegean Sea and Eastern Mediterranean. Greece argues that under international

maritime law, its islands, such as the Island of Kastellorizo, lying two kilometers off Turkey's southern coast, should be granted an extensive EEZ. This would effectively cut Turkey out of the Mediterranean, dashing its hopes of finding and exploiting hydrocarbon resources off the Anatolian coast. Turkey, therefore, argues that the Anatolian mainland generates a continental shelf, which limits the scope of the EEZs of Greek islands and the Republic of Cyprus. International lawyers generally agree that the law of the sea leaves room for interpretation on the issue. However, both parties have taken what most experts would qualify as maximalist approaches in their respective claims (see map). Lack of resolution of the demarcation of maritime boundaries between Greece and Turkey has caused tensions in the past. In 1987, Greece and Turkey confronted each other over the drilling of oil in the Aegean Sea and again in 1996 in a dispute over the status of the small Islets of Imia (or *Kardak* in Turkish). Since then, less acute incidents, such as violations of airspace, have formed part of Greek-Turkish relations.

### A Storm Is Brewing

Alongside these unresolved issues in the Eastern Mediterranean and the discovery of gas, a general trend towards a more assertive and, at times, confrontational, Turkish foreign policy has emerged over the last



decade or so. This new foreign policy stance marks a stark departure from the policy of “zero problems with neighbors” that had shaped Turkish regional foreign policy during roughly the first decade of the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) rule that began in 2003. The reasons for this shift are manifold, often interlinked, and hotly debated. Yet, many observers attribute it to Turkey’s slow move away from the EU and from the West as a model to be emulated and an apparent willingness to revive the past glory of the Ottoman Empire by expanding its influence throughout the wider region. The instrumentalization of foreign policy to rally domestic support for Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and his AKP is an additional factor that is often identified as having contributed to this shift.

This new brand of Turkish foreign policy, coined by some observers as “neo-ottoman” or “nationalistic”, has at times not only led to a brash willingness to act against the interests of its traditional western allies, but also a confrontational stance towards other regional powers. This shift towards a more assertive foreign policy has further estranged Turkey from its allies within NATO and the EU, as well as complicated already difficult relations between Turkey and two other major actors in the Eastern Mediterranean, Egypt and Israel. Both of these countries have seen their relations with Turkey dramatically deteriorate. In the case of Egypt, this is mainly due to Turkey’s persistent support throughout the region for the Muslim Brotherhood – an Islamist movement – in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring. Since the coup against democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood president, Mohamed Morsi, in 2013, the government in Cairo staunchly opposes this movement domestically and throughout the MENA region. This has put Ankara and Cairo at loggerheads. In Israel’s case, the deterioration of formerly relatively close relations in the 2000s was mainly due to Turkey’s newfound international activism in support of the Palestinian cause and its harsh criticism of the Jewish state’s handling of this issue.

It was thus not a surprise to see Turkey being excluded from deepening regional cooperation initiatives in the Eastern Mediterranean between Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel. It is in this context that a collective interest in leveraging

### The Blue Homeland Doctrine (*Mavi Vatan*)

The Blue Homeland Doctrine (*Mavi Vatan* in Turkish) is a naval doctrine that was first announced in 2006. It envisages **a more assertive Turkish stance** in order to assert Turkish control over the seas surrounding Turkey, including the Eastern Mediterranean. The stated end goal of the doctrine is to **augment Turkey’s regional and international influence**, as well as to **enable access to energy resources** to support the country’s economic and demographic growth without dependence on others. Even though it was set out in the late 2000s, the doctrine only recently gained in importance in Turkish foreign political discourse. The doctrine aligns well with the new brand of assertive Turkish foreign policy and the country’s apparent willingness to **revive the past glory of the Ottoman Empire** by expanding Turkey’s influence throughout the wider region. In September 2020, the directorate of communication of the Turkish presidency published a [video](#) that alludes to the doctrine and draws parallels between Ottoman victories in the Eastern Mediterranean in the 16th Century against Christian nations and the steadfastness of the current Turkish navy in the Mediterranean.

Eastern Mediterranean gas reserves by these countries, as well as others, culminated in the creation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in January 2019. Turkey was deliberately not invited to join. In parallel, plans for the EastMed Gas pipeline, projected to connect Israel to Greece via the Republic of Cyprus, also left Turkey out of the equation (see map).

### To counteract regional initiatives that exclude Turkey, Ankara has chosen a path of escalation and confrontation.

These developments raised concerns in Ankara, which increasingly feared being excluded from access to Eastern Mediterranean energy resources and saw these moves as a threat to Turkish ambitions to reduce dependency on energy imports. Driven by the same brand of assertive foreign policy that has informed previous Turkish actions in the region and by its *Mavi Vatan* or “blue home” doctrine (see textbox), Ankara has recently reacted with a series of steps that most independent observers consider the immediate cause of the current crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean.

To counteract regional initiatives aimed at energy exploitation and marketization that exclude Turkey, Ankara has chosen a path of escalation and confrontation. Turkey signed a highly contested and widely criticized maritime boundary treaty with the Libyan GNA in November 2019 (see map). The EEZs claimed by Turkey and the GNA would block the EastMed pipeline’s path, disregard the presence of Greek islands, and overlap with Greek and Egyptian maritime claims. The legitimacy

and the legal consequences of the accord are disputed by a number of Eastern Mediterranean states, including Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel, as well as by the EU. This recent Turkish move has undeniably caused other actors in the region to close ranks. In August 2020, Egypt and Greece signed their own maritime agreement, claiming an EEZ that overlaps with the EEZs claimed in the Turkish and Libyan GNA maritime boundary treaty (see map). Moreover, the EMGF, which has extended its remit to include regional security cooperation and joint military drills, has now evolved into an instrument geared towards countering Turkish influence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Since the beginning of 2019, Turkey has also begun to deploy naval expeditions to explore gas fields in waters claimed by the Republic of Cyprus, and has repeatedly chased away exploration vessels operating under Republic of Cyprus licenses. Ankara has also begun to conduct gas exploration in waters contested by Greece and Turkey. Greece, in turn, has reacted by dispatching naval forces into the contested areas.

This has led to a number of dangerous incidents. In August 2020, a ship of the Greek navy collided with a Turkish warship that was escorting a Turkish geological survey vessel during a standoff in these contested waters, highlighting the potential for escalation. President Erdoğan responded by declaring that any attack on a Turkish ship exploring for oil and gas in disputed Mediterranean waters would incur a “high price”. After a short break in September, Turkish survey ships escorted by the Turkish navy resumed their exploration activities in waters claimed by Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, yet again raising the specter of escalation.

## Consequences of Escalation

The EU has seen its own relations with Turkey deteriorate over the past decade or so due to a plethora of often-interrelated reasons. Amongst them, an authoritarian turn in Turkey, stalled EU accession talks, the handling of the migration crisis, and a number of unilateral Turkish military interventions in Syria. EU-Turkish relations have become increasingly uneasy, transactional, and distrustful. However, Turkey and the EU's mutual dependencies have thus far prevented their relationship from becoming an adversarial one. Against this backdrop of uneasy, yet necessary relations, the EU has repeatedly declared its full solidarity with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus on the issue of Turkish forays in the Eastern Mediterranean. The EU has repeatedly condemned Turkey's actions as illegal and in violation of the sovereign rights of Greece and the Republic of Cyprus. Having to-date imposed only limited sanctions against Turkey, the EU's current approach seems to be based on "soft containment". Yet, this seems to have had little impact on Ankara's behavior, as the resumption of exploration by Turkish vessels after a brief pause in September 2020 seems to demonstrate.

Currently, the EU remains divided on confronting Turkey more forcefully in the Eastern Mediterranean. Due to a number of considerations, EU Member States, such as Italy, Spain, and Germany, are advocating for dialog with Turkey. Germany, which is currently presiding the EU Council and has traditionally tried to maintain good bi-

lateral relations with Turkey, has been especially active in trying to reduce tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. France, however, which has seen its interests abroad repeatedly clash with the more assertive brand of Turkish foreign policy in recent times, chiefly in Libya, has been leading the bloc of countries lobbying for comprehen-

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sive EU sanctions against Ankara. Paris has also dispatched naval forces to the Eastern Mediterranean to lend support to Athens and Nicosia, raising the possibility of military escalation between NATO members France, Greece, and Turkey. Such an escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean, either deliberate or inadvertent, would have far-reaching consequences for regional stability, as well as deleterious effects on the cohesion and credibility of NATO, not to mention the future of EU-Turkish relations.

Further escalation would force the EU to act more assertively. This would deal a heavy blow to Turkey's already faltering economy as a result of probably far-reaching EU-sanctions, cuts in EU funds, as well as the drying up of European investments in Turkey. While stoking the flames of nationalism on the issue of Eastern Mediterranean gas might seem to make sense for Erdogan and the AKP for the purpose of

rallying domestic support, a crash of the already declining Turkish economy would likely set them up for failure in the 2023 Turkish general election. Key European interests would also be adversely affected by an escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean since it depends on Ankara's cooperation in areas such as control of irregular migration and counter-terrorism, both of which are also of fundamental importance to Greece. In the case of an escalation, Ankara would very likely use these issues as leverage against the EU, as it has repeatedly threatened to do in the past. An escalating crisis would also further dilute cohesion within NATO, erode its credibility, and perhaps even paralyze the Alliance. This would benefit none of the actors currently jostling with each other in the Eastern Mediterranean given that NATO remains of fundamental importance as a guarantor of security and stability. The stakes are thus very high. It remains to be seen whether the prospect of such dire repercussions of an escalation will be enough for all the actors to compromise in order to find a peaceful solution to the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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