

Eastern Mediterranean Brinkmanship Is a Clear and Present Danger

GMF Experts

The United States and Europe cannot be complacent about the risk of conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean. Alongside the dangerous situation in the South China Sea, the deepening confrontation in the Aegean and in the waters off Cyprus, Crete, and Libya is arguably the most serious and immediate security flashpoint facing transatlantic partners today. The crisis poses key tests for NATO and the European Union. On the face of it, the crisis has been driven by maritime demarcation disputes affecting offshore energy exploration and transport. These differences are longstanding and could be amenable to legal and diplomatic solutions. However, current brinkmanship is not really about energy per se, and it is being shaped by wider strategic developments.

Greek-Turkish relations are at the core. The détente that has prevailed between Athens and Ankara since the late 1990s is on the verge of collapse. This would have profound implications for regional stability and NATO's ability to function in the face of pressing security demand emanating from the Levant, North Africa, and around the Mediterranean. Even if the immediate threat of conflict can be contained, the alliance could be faced with a return to the tense conditions that prevailed for decades and impeded NATO solidarity and operations.

There have been profound changes on both sides. Turkey has lost its inhibitions regarding power projection. It has become a more independent and assertive actor, encouraged by operational successes in Syria and Libya. The country has also rediscovered its maritime interests and strategy. And at a time of over-heated nationalism, Cyprus and sovereignty concerns in the Aegean and beyond are nationalist issues par excellence across the political spectrum. Ankara has few supporters for its assertive posture in Europe or among NATO allies, who are already deeply troubled by President Erdogan's rhetoric and authoritarianism, the S-400 deal with Russia, and Ankara's policy in Syria and Libya.

Greece, for its part, has never been closer to its transatlantic partners. Differences over finances aside, Athens is now fully in the European mainstream on key policy questions. Greek-American security cooperation has expanded significantly over the last decade, spanning changes of administration in Athens and Washington. Support from transatlantic allies and regional actors such as Egypt and the UAE has encouraged a tougher stance in Athens where maritime sovereignty issues are central to the national narrative.

Both Greece and Turkey would have much to lose from an actual conflict—a reality acknowledged by all sides. It is enough to note that the tourist economy dwarfs the energy stakes on both sides of the Aegean. The coro-

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navirus pandemic and the economic crisis affecting both countries underscore this reality. A Greek-Turkish clash would impose tremendous costs and would likely result in Turkey's open-ended estrangement from Western partners. It would pose huge challenges for NATO cohesion and operations. Moscow might be the only beneficiary.

Greece and Turkey are at the center of this maelstrom. But unlike past periods of regional brinkmanship, many more actors are engaged politically and militarily this time. The United States, Russia, France, Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Italy, and the UAE are among the countries conducting naval and air operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. The potential for accidents, misjudgment, and escalation has increased substantially. Recent incidents between French and Turkish ships and a glancing collision between Greek and Turkish frigates in mid-August illustrate the risk. Things can and do go wrong—and can easily get out of control.

Who will intervene to forestall these risks? Washington played a critical role in defusing the Imia/Kardak crisis between Greece and Turkey in 1996. It is unclear whether Washington has the willingness or credibility with all sides to play this role today. Perhaps, but the protagonists are uncertain. This could be a key test for an EU that aspires to a greater geopolitical role. Does Brussels have the agility and credibility in Ankara to act? It is understandably devoted to solidarity with a member of the European club. With a keen awareness of the consequences of alienating Ankara entirely, Berlin has been trying to broker a dialogue. NATO is a leading stakeholder in the outcome and has standing with all sides. The alliance cannot resolve the underlying disputes. But it could be the moment for a more political NATO to help put in place military-to-military talks and risk reduction measures before “the fire next time.”

Ian Lesser, vice president of the German Marshall Fund

Turkey Disrupts What It Perceives as Maximalist Greek Policy

Ankara has repeatedly called for dialogue and argues that Greece and Cyprus have taken maximalist and uncompromising positions toward energy rights in the Eastern Mediterranean. Now Turkey is countering with its own maximalist approach, which includes coercive diplomacy.

The establishment of the EastMed Gas Forum in January 2020 by Cyprus (not recognized by Turkey), Egypt, Greece, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine has been perceived by Ankara as an attempt to exclude and contain Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, the maritime claims by the Republic of Cyprus and Greece created at least two sets of problems.

On the divided island in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Republic of Cyprus has made exclusive economic zone (EEZ) claims that include the Turkish side of the island. Its plans involve exploiting maritime resources and depositing the Turkish Cypriots' share of the revenue in a bank account which will be frozen until there is a solution to the Cyprus Problem.

Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Cyprus (TRNC, recognized by Turkey only) previously made two proposals. The first proposal was deferring the exploitation of the maritime resources around the island until there is a solution to the Cyprus dispute, making energy resources an incentive to reach a settlement. The

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other proposal was a model whereby the two sides on the island would transfer their rights to a third party, with separate agreements to circumvent the recognition problem, which in turn would transfer revenues to both parties using an agreed upon formula. Both proposals were rejected and Cyprus went ahead with licensing drilling rights to energy companies and signing EEZ agreements with third countries that include waters also claimed by Turkey and the TRNC.

The problem between Greece and Turkey is far more complicated. Greece has several islands that are very close to the Turkish coast. Kastellorizo island is such a case, two km off the Turkish coast, roughly 12 km² in size with total a population of 492, according to the 2011 census. Greece claims EEZ for all of its islands, including Kastellorizo. According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), islands indeed can project EEZ so long as they are inhabitable. Turkey, which is not a signatory of UNCLOS and therefore not bound by its provisions, wants to negotiate a delimitation agreement with Greece in which small island off Turkey's coast would not enjoy the same EEZ as Turkish mainland. Greece, an EU member with more popularity than Ankara in the region and beyond, enjoys a vast diplomatic support and sees little reason to seek a compromise solution and has refused to negotiate.

Turkey has responded to the positions of Cyprus and Greece with its own maximalist approach, claiming EEZ's overlapping with Greece and Cyprus, signing delimitation agreements with the TRNC and the UN recognized government in Libya, and sending its drilling ships to contested waters under the protection of the Turkish navy. If it were not for the diplomatic efforts of Germany backed actively by the United States, the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean could have easily gotten out of control and could still do so.

While this crisis cannot be resolved in the short run, it can be mitigated, and it should be mitigated to reduce the risk of armed conflict. Greece needs to understand that this is a specific situation in which a delimitation agreement through negotiations between the two countries is the only workable solution. Turkey needs to understand that while Turkey is not a signatory of UNCLOS and therefore not bound by its provisions, an acceptable solution to Greece cannot be too far from the principles of UNCLOS. Turkey should also stop sabre rattling; it creates an image of 19th century power politics which is not very popular these days.

A long negotiation process should be expected as both governments have taken very strong positions and compromise may appear as weakness back home for both. As the negotiations will take a while, the two parties should agree to freeze all activities in the form of claiming EEZs, issuing licenses, or sending drilling ships for the duration of the negotiations. Last but not least, third countries should refrain from taking actions that encourage either party to be uncompromising.

Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, director of GMF's Ankara Office

Europe's Leadership Tested as EastMed Reaches Fever Pitch

As a long-standing territorial dispute between NATO allies Turkey and Greece threatens to escalate into military confrontation, Europeans are called upon to prevent an explosion at their immediate doorstep. Time to walk the talk: can Europe do geopolitics?

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Nominally about gas drilling rights and territorial sovereignty, the latest tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean reflect a nationalist rhetoric linked to a projected Turkish geopolitical prevalence in an arena that now encompasses the Cyprus conflict, the Libyan civil war, and the larger questions about Turkey's aptitude as an ally, the future of NATO, and Europe's security and cohesion, in one big, fat knot.

Following Turkey's dispatch of a drilling ship into Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone, in May, the European Council issued a strong, unequivocal statement calling upon Turkey to end its "illegal activities in the Eastern Mediterranean" and respect "the sovereignty of all EU member states over their territorial sea as well as all their sovereign rights in their maritime zones." Beyond words, EU foreign ministers have however been reluctant to display more forceful action in the past weeks, trying instead to gain time by postponing decisions on new sanctions against Turkey. This reluctant behavior contrasts with the resolute European action on Belarus, the other urgent geostrategic crisis unfolding in parallel at Europe's doorstep.

France has been the most vocal among EU member states to throw its weight behind Greece and unequivocally criticize Erdogan. Fiery statements by Macron, culminating in an announcement in mid-August to step up France's naval presence in the Eastern Med, led to an escalating war of words between Paris and Ankara. In early July, France had already pulled out of the NATO maritime security mission Sea Guardian after a French ship patrolling Mediterranean waters as part of the mission had been threatened by a Turkish cargo vessel it had attempted to inspect. A similar incident had been reported by the Greek navy in April when trying to inspect a Turkish vessel as part of the EU's naval mission Operation Irini, which was deployed in February to monitor the UN arms embargo against Libya.

The vehemence of France's position toward Turkey in the gas dispute must also be seen in the light of France's interest in rolling back Turkey's new role in the Libyan civil war. In November 2019, Turkey had signed a highly contested maritime border delineation agreement with the UN-recognized Libyan government in Tripoli, essentially exchanging military support in the civil war for controversial drilling rights in Libyan waters. European passivity in the Libyan civil war had enabled Turkey to seize this opportunity to link Libya's fate to the East Med gas quagmire, buying strategic advantage on the cheap. Turkey's forceful entry into the Libyan war on behalf of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA, formally recognized by the UN and the EU) shattered the prospects of Khalifa Haftar, on whom France had placed its bets in Libya. The EU's deployment of Operation Irini has been criticized by some observers as a biased effort to enforce the UN arms embargo for Libya as it hinders Turkey from backing up the UN-backed GNA against Haftar's forces while failing to place similar constraints on other warring parties such as the UAE and Russia that provide arms shipments mainly via air or land.

Germany has undertaken intense shuttle diplomacy in the past weeks between Paris, Athens, and Ankara in an attempt to de-escalate between the parties. Acutely aware that the situation between Ankara and Athens has reached fever pitch, Berlin's efforts now focus on getting both sides to end military maneuver as the precondition for a mediated dialogue on maritime sovereignty claims. While Macron and Merkel have jointly emphasized the primacy of stability and solidarity with EU member states Greece and Cyprus, Merkel has advocated a course of de-escalation through dialogue. Economic concerns, as well as fear of Turkey's leverage over Europe as a gatekeeper for irregular migration, are likely to inform Berlin's sustained appeasement approach vis-à-vis an expansionist Turkey that behaves more like a rival than an ally. But while France might

be partially guided by its Libya lens and certainly takes a more sober view on Erdogan's expansionist agenda, Merkel's Germany will prioritize the larger strategic risks: the loss of Turkey as a NATO ally, and a destabilization of NATO's Southern flank through a spread of Russian influence and military presence across North Africa, which a divided NATO will be unable to counter.

Kristina Kausch, GMF senior resident fellow in Brussels

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