

## Conflicts and Global Powers in the Eastern Mediterranean

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# Turkey and the Major Powers in the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis from the 2010s to the 2020s

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the recent Mediterranean disputes involving Turkey with respect to the major powers of the European Union (EU), United States (US), Russia and China. The author maintains that Turkey's position has been determined by its own interests in the region as informed by its relations with the major powers, their vested interests in the disputes, Turkey's maritime foreign policy ideology (*Mavi Vatan*), its economic and military capabilities and the shifting international system. Turkey is found to regard the EU and the US as supportive of the Greek and Greek Cypriot policies, although the EU countries are somewhat divided on how to show that support. In such a context, Turkey has desired to have Russia and China on its side in the disputes concerning the Eastern Mediterranean, to counterbalance the influence of the US and the EU. This, however, did not come to fruition since Russia and China opted to remain neutral.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Eastern Mediterranean, energy, foreign policy

## Introduction

Since 1967, when gas was first found in the Abu Madi field in Egypt, the volume of natural gas discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean region has surpassed 5,000 billion cubic meters (bcm). It is estimated that the region's undiscovered gas reserves are twice as large as the volume discovered to date (Karbuž 2021, 116–7). The unresolved issues with the demarcation of maritime boundaries in the region, such as between Turkey and Greece, the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) and Turkey, Lebanon and Israel, Syria and the RoC as well as Palestine and Israel, pose a significant problem in the exploration and exploitation of gas. Another significant obstacle to

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the export of gas outside the region is the lack of sufficient infrastructure (pipelines, storage facilities, etc.). The Cyprus problem remains a sizable impediment to the shipment of gas by pipeline via Turkey or the planned Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline Project (EastMed pipeline) from Israel to Italy.

As neighbouring countries seek to exploit gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, old and new issues are giving the resource development a geopolitical dimension. Concern centres on the unsettled Cyprus problem as well as the historical animosity between Greece and Turkey. The Eastern Mediterranean dispute, which dates back to the 1990s, has also merged with other regional issues after the Arab Spring, including Syria and Libya, while the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has been competing with Turkey for regional influence, has taken the side of Greece and the RoC. In the civil war in Libya, Greece and the RoC backed the commander of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army (LNA) Khalifa Haftar against the Fayed al-Sarraj government, which signed a maritime boundary delimitation agreement with Turkey in November 2019. They were joined by Egypt, whose relations with Turkey have been strained in recent years, mainly because of Turkey's support for the ousted Muslim Brotherhood. Israel's relations with Turkey have also declined, mainly due to the Palestinian issue. France and the US have not been on Turkey's side recently, due to various diverging interests. Elsewhere, Italy's objectives have diverged from those of Turkey, partially because of disagreement about the exploitation of the Eastern Mediterranean gas reserves. As a result, a veritable anti-Turkish club was created with the formation of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in January 2019, comprising the RoC, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Greece, Italy, Jordan and France, with the US as a permanent observer (Mitchell 2020).

This analysis focuses on Turkey's approach to the stances and policies of the major powers in this ongoing tension in the Eastern Mediterranean since the 2010s. It argues that Turkey's view has been informed by a combination of its own interests in the region, its relations with the major powers and their respective vested interests in the dispute, its "Blue Homeland" (*Mavi Vatan*) maritime foreign policy ideology, its economic and military capabilities and the shifting international system.

In the first section, I unveil the internal and external factors that contributed to the rise of an assertive foreign policy on the part of Turkey, including the shifting international order, the improvement of the country's material capabilities and the nationalist backlash following the coup plot of 15 July 2016, when a group of officers within the Turkish military, who were allegedly connected with the Sunni cleric Fethullah Gülen, led a failed attempt to overthrow the government. The second section provides an overview of the main tenets of Turkish policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, highlighting the importance of sovereign rights to the economic value of hydrocarbon resources. This part also describes the main

characteristics of the Blue Homeland foreign policy doctrine. The third and largest section elucidates Turkey's view on the positions of the EU, several EU member states, the US, Russia and China on the Eastern Mediterranean issues.

## Sources of Turkey's Assertive Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean

Turkey has adopted an assertive line in foreign policy in the last decade, which accelerated after the July 2016 coup attempt. Several factors were responsible for this, including the Eastern Mediterranean energy context. These can be divided into internal and external considerations. Internal developments concerned a major improvement in Turkey's economic and military capabilities during the previous two decades, the rise of a siege mentality after the July 2016 coup plot, the expansion of the powers of the president in foreign policy following the referendum in April 2017 and the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government's partnership with the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) after 2015. External reasons included the worsening of Turkey's relationships with the EU and the US, linked in part to domestic and external challenges afflicting the EU and the transformation of the global governance system in favour of emerging powers like Turkey, together with the rise of threat perceptions in Turkey's neighbourhood.

Regarding the external factors, first of all, as Turkey's ties with the EU gradually declined, the EU's leverage on Turkish foreign policy decreased. Thus, Turkey set its own, independent course. The deterioration of the Turkey–EU relationship started in 2006 with disagreement over Cyprus. The Cyprus issue has been an ongoing problem between the Greek Cypriots and Greece on the one hand and the Turkish Cypriots and Turkey on the other. Since the Turkish military operation of 1974 on the island to protect the Turkish Cypriots amid skirmishes with the Greek Cypriots, the island has remained divided between the Turkish part in the north and the Greek in the south; attempts to unite the island since then have proved futile.

Furthermore, the relationship between Turkey and the EU has been exacerbated by the EU's criticism of the AKP government's handling of the Gezi Park events and mass protests in 2013. These started at the end of May 2013 in Istanbul and lasted several months, with demonstrations initially protesting an urban development plan for the city centre, then expanding into a country-wide mass civil unrest against the government to protest the lack of freedom and its alleged adoption of Islamism in the rule of the country.

Then, after the foiled coup in 2016, relations between Ankara and Brussels reached a nadir. Thereafter, the relationship has been marked by a series of crises, including the row over the European network of Fethullah Gülen, alleged mastermind of the coup plot. Gülen is a self-exiled Sunni cleric, who lives in the US with a large following generally thought to have been behind the failed 2016 coup. His movement split off the AKP government in 2013, following a corruption scandal.

Moreover, various internal and external challenges helped reduce the EU's clout over Turkey. These include Brexit, the issue of Syrian refugees since 2015, the rise in Islamophobia, the empowerment of Eurosceptic illiberal populist parties, the lack of a coherent EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the growing Russian assertiveness after its annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Beyond the EU–Turkish relations, a gradual transition towards a multipolar world has increased the international role of emerging non-Western actors, such as the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the NICs (newly industrialised countries), among them Turkey, and diminished that of the West (Creutz et al. 2019, 67–8). The 2008–09 global economic crisis accelerated the shifting global order as it hit the Western economies severely. Following this crisis, the US began a partial retreat from global politics and also realignment of emphasis from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This sped up under president Donald Trump, who focused on domestic problems and neglected global issues, especially regarding opposition to Russia. The partial withdrawal of the US from international politics created a power vacuum in the Middle East, which increased the self-confidence of emerging actors like Turkey, incentivising it to act independently in foreign policy.

In addition, Turkey's threat perception increased in the context of the Arab uprisings in the post-2011 era and peaked following the 2016 coup attempt. The Syrian conflict, the rise of the Democratic Union Party (*Partîya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD) in Syria, which is linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), an outlawed Kurdish terrorist organisation that initiated a separatist war with the Turkish military forces in 1984, the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the power struggle between Turkey and the Gulf countries, Egypt and Russia in the Middle East led Turkey to espouse an assertive stance in foreign policy. The Turkish government's allegation that the coup attempt in July 2016 was a Gülenist conspiracy supported in the West revived the traditional siege mentality, boosting Turkey's militarist approach in foreign affairs (Mehmetcik and Çelik 2021). Last but not least, Turkey's security concerns were further reinforced by the alliance between Greece, Israel and the RoC, which was then expanded with the creation of the EMGF.

As for domestic reasons, a considerable increase in Turkey's economic and military power capabilities prepared the ground for its assertive foreign policy. Turkey's GDP per capita reached USD 3,687 in 2002 and rose to USD 9,126 in 2019

(The World Bank n.d.). The remarkable growth in the Turkish economy (making it a NIC) enabled an expansion in defence spending, which jumped by over a third between 2009 and 2017 (from USD 14.34 to USD 19.58 billion yearly) (Bekdil 2019). The Turkish economy was affected little by the global economic/financial downturn in 2008. Developments in the Turkish arms industry, moreover, meant that as of 2019, 70% of the arms and military equipment used by the Turkish military was home-produced (Gurini 2020). In short, the growing economic prosperity and increasing military capabilities granted Turkey a degree of strategic autonomy in foreign military operations.

Another internal cause of the development of autonomy enabling assertiveness in foreign policy was a growing ideological shift of the AKP government toward a nationalist approach. This prompted it to embrace a go-it-alone foreign policy in the first place. The AKP moved towards the right as its need to take account of liberals at home decreased due to the party's increased legitimacy following successive electoral victories and greater power within the state, especially vis-a-vis the military, which gradually came under the direction of civil authority. After the AKP fell out with the Gülenists in 2013, it forged a de facto coalition with the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) in 2015. The Kurdish peace process collapsed the same year and then the failed coup gave the leverage for control of the military under the executive to be finally and fully achieved. These developments paved the way for the AKP to take a more nationalist stance in foreign policy. Finally, the transition to an executive presidency system after the referendum in April 2017, which helped the president to pursue a more independent policy targeting the domestic audience, was another development facilitating Turkish foreign policy assertiveness (Kirişçi and Toygür 2019, 6).

## Turkey's Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean

Turkey's dynamic foreign policy is illustrated in the Eastern Mediterranean. The energy resources here are important for Turkey, as they could enhance Turkey's energy security, and even enable it to go further and become a regional energy hub. Regarding the former—and given that Turkey imports approximately 75% of the energy it consumes—exploitation of the Eastern Mediterranean would help Turkey diversify its energy resources and increase its leverage over its traditional energy suppliers, such as Iran and Russia. In addition, sovereign maritime rights and the issue of delimitation involve long-standing issues in the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece. Because of these two important (financial and security) dimensions, the settlement of ownership and sharing of hydrocarbon reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean are extremely sensitive subjects for Turkey (Tsakiris, Ülgen and Han 2018, 19).

The ideational foundation of Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean policy is the Blue Homeland doctrine (which gave the name for the naval exercise mentioned above). This doctrine was created by admiral Cem Gürdeniz in October 2006 in reaction to the Seville map, which supported the Greek arguments regarding the breadth of the continental shelf and the demilitarisation of the Greek islands in the Aegean. Two scholars from Seville University had drafted a map for the delimitation of exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of Greece and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea upon a request by the European Union. The map limits Turkey's continental shelf to its territorial waters and thus favours Greece and the RoC. Showing EU member state exclusive economic zones (EEZ), the Seville map supported the maritime borders claimed by the RoC (Denizeau 2021).

In spite of its dubious legality, Turkey objected to the Seville map vehemently. In reaction to it, figures in the Turkish military and admiral Gürdeniz drafted the Blue Homeland doctrine, which advocated for a larger EEZ for Turkey. It claims the eastern half of the Aegean Sea as within Turkey's EEZ without the annexation of the Greek islands within these boundaries but by granting them the territorial waters of six nautical miles. The doctrine, which has been further developed by admiral Cihat Yaycı, also rejects Greek arguments regarding the breadth of the continental shelf and demands the demilitarisation of the Greek islands in the Aegean. The EEZs declared in line with the Blue Homeland doctrine for the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean clash with those claimed by the other littoral states. This presents particular difficulties for Turkey's relations with the RoC and Greece (Denizeau 2021).

The Cyprus dispute is central to Turkey's approach to the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey takes the basic position of rejecting any outright granting of concession blocks to energy firms by the Greek Cypriots for exploration and exploitation activities until a final settlement between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots is agreed upon. Cyprus claims to an exclusive economic zone (EEZ), divided into 13 blocks, which are guessed to possess rich gas reserves. It grants concessions to foreign energy firms to explore and exploit gas in these blocks. Turkey on the other hand maintains that it has *ipso facto* and *ab initio* rights that do not need to be declared. Thus, Turkey regards Greek-Cypriot arguments on parts of the (underwater, seabed) territory—concession blocks 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7—as a contravention of its sovereignty (Tsakiris, Ulgen and Han 2018, 8). Moreover, to the east, north and south of Cyprus, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) signed an agreement with Turkey on 21 September 2011, dividing the continental shelf between the parties (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011a). With yet another agreement, Turkish Petroleum Inc. (TPAO) obtained territorial exploration rights to parts of concession blocks 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 12 and 13 (Tsakiris, Ulgen and Han 2018, 9).

Primarily, Turkey resorted to “gunboat diplomacy” in order to safeguard its interests. It obstructed foreign drilling vessels in the waters around Cyprus while conducting military-vessel-supported gas-drilling activities in maritime areas also claimed by Greece. Furthermore, in November 2019 it concluded a highly contested maritime boundary deal with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). This deal would serve many objectives for Turkey, including the cutting off of the EastMed pipeline route extending from Israel to Italy (thus serving Europe), sidestepping Greek and Egyptian maritime arguments (against its claims and activities) and avoiding the issues around several Greek islands (Merz 2020, 3).

In addition, Turkey has employed diplomatic means in the Eastern Mediterranean confrontation. It has protested against all bilateral exclusive economic zone (EEZ) delimitation agreements concluded by littoral states since the early 2000s, arguing that the Mediterranean is a semi-closed sea and all relevant littoral states should be a party to delimitation agreements (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011b). In parallel with these objections, it has prepared the legal ground for its own exploration and exploitation activities.

## Turkey and the EU in the Eastern Mediterranean

In the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey’s interests have also clashed with those of the West. A general sense of distrust has hardened Turkey’s approach in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis also here. A milestone in the relations between Ankara and Brussels was the July 2016 coup attempt, in which the support from EU capitals to the Turkish government was seen as too little too late. Since then, Turkey has come to see the EU as less friendly. Parallel to the decline in Turkish–EU relations, Ankara’s relationship with Washington has slid into a downward spiral. After the coup attempt, Turkey started to consider the US as no longer an ally, partly because of its possible involvement.

Meanwhile, Turkey’s close collaboration with Russia in foreign policy enabled Turkey to gain a sense of independence from the West, which further incentivised Ankara to pursue an assertive stance in the Eastern Mediterranean. Also, the perception on the part of officials in Ankara that the EU is a declining power encouraged Turkey to adopt a defiant attitude towards the EU over the Eastern Mediterranean issue (Rakipoğlu 2019).

It was after early 2018 that Turkey started to pursue an assertive policy here, sending its gas-drilling ships to the contentious waters around Cyprus and blocking the entry of foreign drilling vessels. The EU responded with light sanctions, but these measures were far from effective in changing Turkey’s position (Council of the European Union 2019). On the contrary, Turkey responded

assertively once more, signing the mentioned maritime boundary delineation deal in December 2019 with the GNA in Libya, for instance. However, Turkey's attitude towards the Eastern Mediterranean issue did soften following EU attempts to induce Turkey to develop a more constructive attitude. The EU provision of material incentives was an important factor in this. For example, it modernised the Customs Union in the 2015 refugee crisis triggered by the Syrian conflict, when approximately 1.3 million refugees, mostly Syrians, arrived in EU countries seeking asylum, following which, in March 2016, an agreement was reached between Turkey and the EU to close Turkey's borders to refugees, which effectively halted the influx of refugees to Europe via Turkey. The EU's dependency on Turkey as a buffer against the human inflow following this deal strengthened the hand of Turkey against the EU in the Eastern Mediterranean (Author's Interview with a Political Scientist from a University in Istanbul, Istanbul, 11 August 2021).

Turkey also made use of the divisions in the EU on how to respond to Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean issue, as it were these divisions that produced the only light sanctions against Ankara. It was extremely critical of the EU's policy in the Eastern Mediterranean quarrel. Its politicians and media repeatedly blamed the EU for not being impartial and siding with Greece and the RoC against Turkey. The EU was accused of acting "blindly as the mouthpiece of Greece and the RoC under a pretext of solidarity" (Turkey Criticizes EU Position, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 17 May 2020). Instead, it was argued, the EU ought to take account of international law and Turkey's and Turkish Cypriots' rightful interests and rights. Moreover, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan maintained that the EU had never been honest with Turkey, that Turkey did not mind the economic sanctions and that it would continue to safeguard its rights (Erdoğan: Threats of EU Sanctions on Turkey, *Al Jazeera*, 9 December 2020). That is, Turkey took a defiant line and did not immediately change its position or make any concessions to the EU in the Eastern Mediterranean. On the contrary, EU policies in the region were considered to represent "imperialist expansionism" (Chrysoloras, Hacaoglu and Stearns 2020).

Later on, a series of developments prompted Turkey to switch once more to a more conciliatory stance towards the EU, the US and the other states involved in the Eastern Mediterranean conflict. Above all, Joe Biden's taking office as US president acted as a game changer. Even before assuming the presidency, Biden had adopted a quite hostile attitude to the government in Ankara, signalling that he would play hardball (Makovsky 2020). President Biden only called president Erdoğan three months after he took office, and he later became the first US president to recognise the Armenian genocide (Borger and Chulov 2021). His indication that the US would recommit to its global role and coordinate with the EU compelled the Turkish government to undertake a major shift in its approach to the Eastern Mediterranean.



At the same time, Turkey saw itself increasingly isolated in foreign affairs in recent years, which made it consider changing its position towards the EU and the other states in the Eastern Mediterranean, who had started to cooperate on the demarcation of their EEZs back in 2010. The creation of the EMGF on 14 January 2019 excluded Turkey, increasing its isolation. Another regional initiative that sidelined Turkey was the Eastern Mediterranean gas pipeline (EMGP) agreement signed by Israel, Greece and Cyprus in January 2020 (Axt 2021, 135–6).

Last but not least, Brussels' signal that the material incentives to be provided to Turkey for the settlement of the Eastern Mediterranean crisis would not be conditional upon normative requirements, such as in the field of human rights or gender equality, facilitated Turkey's changed approach to the Eastern Mediterranean dispute (Author's Interview with a Political Scientist from a University in Istanbul, Istanbul, 11 August 2021). Thus, it abandoned the militaristic posturing and brinkmanship, opting instead for a negotiated settlement of the Eastern Mediterranean issue with the EU.

And finally, to date (July 2022), the Russian war against Ukraine has caused the hitherto problematic Turkey–Western ties to improve somewhat (Dalay 2020). Showcasing its importance, the war has strengthened Turkey's bargaining power vis-à-vis the EU and the US when it comes to the Eastern Mediterranean. To start with, the Russian assault on Ukraine highlighted the continued importance of Turkey—as a Western ally on NATO's southern flank and a neighbour of Russia—in safeguarding European security via its control of access to the Black Sea. This was underlined by Ankara's closure of the Turkish Straits to warships in line with the Montreux Convention. Signed on 20 July 1936, this international agreement regulates maritime traffic through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, authorising Turkey to prevent the passage of warships to and from the Black Sea during wartime under Article 19. This gives Turkey geopolitical leverage. Turkey's mediating role between Russia and Ukraine was another occasion to emphasise its value in regional affairs.

The Russian war against Ukraine has distracted Moscow's attention from regional issues in Libya, Syria, Africa and the South Caucasus, enabling Ankara's influence in these areas to increase (Kortunov 2022, 5). This, in turn, strengthens its leverage in relations with the West. Moreover, since the EU has embarked on a radical cut of its Russian gas and oil imports, alternative energy resources have gained in importance. This could empower Ankara via the shipment of Eastern Mediterranean gas through its territory to Europe, piped, for instance, through the Southern Gas Corridor. Given the doubts concerning the economic, political and technological feasibility of the EastMed project as well as the US withdrawal from it under the Biden administration, the option to carry Eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe through Turkey became more attractive, and the war against Ukraine increased this. According to strategic studies expert Michaël Tanchum, “With

events in Ukraine focusing a sense of urgency on natural gas, combined with Turkey's recent rapprochement efforts with Israel and other Middle Eastern actors, the previous political obstacles could be resolved" (Turkey Best Option for East Med Gas Transit, *Daily Sabah*, 10 March 2022).

The war against Ukraine has also made Turkey's role as an energy hub more realistic. In the framework of the Southern Gas Corridor, since December 2020 Turkey had already been supplying non-Russian (Azeri) gas to Europe through the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) via the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP). When this route becomes fully operational, it will provide Europe with 10 bcm of gas per year (Taştan 2021, 2). Turkey's location at the crossroads of the Caspian, Middle Eastern, Central Asian and Eastern Mediterranean energy deposits highlights the part Turkey could play in carrying non-Russian energy to the European continent, enhancing European energy supply security. Particularly in the short-to-medium-term, the shipment of Iranian gas and oil to Europe via Turkey would boost Turkey's role, dependent on the success of the Iranian nuclear negotiations (Turkey Offers 'Alternative' as Energy, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 28 March 2022).

Each EU member state has a different degree of interest in any particular issue. In the following, I investigate in greater detail the positions of some of them in the Eastern Mediterranean dispute and Turkey's assessments in this context.

## Greece

Relations between Athens and Ankara, which enjoyed a golden era during Turkey's EU process after 1999, hit rock bottom during the Eastern Mediterranean crisis. Amid the escalated tension over the latter, many of the old problems resurfaced and combined with new ones, such as the refugee issue. There was also an issue with Turkish officers who took refuge in Greece following the July 2016 coup attempt, whom Turkey wanted to be extradited, a request that Greece did not accede to on the basis that the officers could not expect any guarantee of a fair trial to be honoured in practice (Greek Court Blocks New Extradition Request for Turkish Soldiers, *Reuters*, 3 May 2017).

Ankara tried to justify its assertive position in the Eastern Mediterranean by pointing to the fact that the length of its coastal areas there was more than 1,700 kilometres (km) while that of Greece was less than 200 km—which, from Turkey's perspective, rendered Greece a marginal country in the region, and certainly so when compared to Turkey (Author's Interview with Prof. Ferhat Pirinççi, Bursa, 21 January 2022). Moreover, Turkey claims that the Aegean Sea has special characteristics and thus that the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—an international agreement governing all maritime and

marine activities that came into effect in 1994—are not applicable (Türmen 2020). All this has affected Turkey's attitude towards Greece regarding the Eastern Mediterranean crisis.

Athens strengthening its military capacity, such as by purchasing weapons from France (Wiegel 2021), its entry into regional and international alliances in order to contain Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean and its creation of a Friendship (*Philia*) Forum comprising regional countries and France, galvanised Ankara into hardening its stance. Turkey regarded Greece's maritime jurisdiction and airspace claims in the Eastern Mediterranean as maximalist and viewed the military alliance between the two NATO members France and Greece as harmful for the organisation as a whole (Turkey Says Greek–French Defence Pact Harms NATO Alliance, *AP News*, 1 October 2021).

That Greece and Egypt signed a maritime border agreement in August 2020 only increased the sense of isolation on the part of Turkey, which regarded Greece's actions in the Eastern Mediterranean as provocative and demanded that the problems in the Aegean be addressed as a whole (Turkey Urges Greece to Heed Ankara's Calls, *Daily Sabah*, 21 November 2020). Overall, Athens' efforts to elicit the support of EU member states for tougher sanctions against Turkey produced mixed results. To a large extent, Turkey succeeded in thwarting the efforts of Greece, the Republic of Cyprus and France to impose tougher sanctions on it through its lobbying activities in EU capitals close to Turkey. This is also an indication that Turkey–EU relations are so multidimensional that they cannot be sacrificed to Greek–EU relations (Author's Interview with Prof. Ferhat Pirinççi, Bursa, 21 January 2022). In this crisis, Turkey lobbied in some EU countries with which it had close relationships, including Germany, Italy, Malta, Bulgaria and Hungary.

## Republic of Cyprus

Along with Greece, it was the RoC whose interests diverged most in the Eastern Mediterranean from those of Turkey and the TRNC, primarily because of the dispute over the divided island. The RoC and Greece held regular military drills with their Middle Eastern partners and formed trilateral mechanisms of cooperation with Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. The RoC also sought to involve EU member states such as France and Italy in the Eastern Mediterranean issue by granting rights to major energy firms such as ENI and Total to explore the hydrocarbon resources around the island. It cultivated closer ties with its traditional ally, Russia, as well as the US, and it pressed the EU for tougher measures and sanctions against Turkey.

Turkey sees the Eastern Mediterranean issue as part of a comprehensive solution of the Cyprus problem and suggests that both the Greek and Turkish Cypriots should

together exploit the natural resources of the island (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs n.d.). Turkey dismissed the RoC's policies and actions in the Eastern Mediterranean, including the exploitation of energy resources, as unilateral and failing to recognise the rights and interests of the Turkish Cypriot community (Türkiye'den Güney Kıbrıs Rum Yönetimi'ne Tepki, *Anadolu Ajansı*, 13 July 2017). Turkey found it unacceptable for the RoC to insist on acting as if it were the sole representative of Cyprus without the Cyprus issue having been settled (Türkiye'den Güney Kıbrıs Rum Yönetimi'ne Tepki, *Takvim*, 29 December 2017). Thus, Turkey did not allow drilling activities by international energy firms to be conducted in the waters around the island. Turkey strove to obstruct such RoC attempts through harsh military measures and making use of the exploration and exploitation licences granted to it by the TRNC. In this way, Turkey demonstrated that it would not allow the RoC to take unilateral steps (Author's Interview with Prof. Ferhat Pirinççi, Bursa, 21 January 2022).

## Germany

During the Eastern Mediterranean conflict from the end of the 2010s to the beginning of the 2020s, Turkey developed a positive stance towards Germany. Despite recent negative trends in relations with Turkey, particularly after the 2016 coup attempt, Germany's prioritisation of diplomatic instruments in international conflicts rather than resorting to hard power, Turkey's special relationship with Germany because of their close economic ties and the presence of more than three million people of Turkish origin there were all instrumental in this bilateral relation. In 2020, German–Turkish trade was valued at 38 billion USD; nearly 7,000 German firms do business in Turkey, including Mercedes and Siemens; and Turkey is also an important customer for the German arms industry (Germany Invests €25 Bln in Turkish Energy Sector, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 3 June 2021).

For Germany, the most pressing issue in the wider region was the influx of Syrian and other refugees to the European continent, which provided Turkey with a good bargaining chip in the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, in the absence of the US as a mediator under the Trump administration, Germany tried to fill the void. While showing solidarity with Greece, as an EU member state, in the dispute between the two countries Germany shied away from extreme rhetoric or policies against Turkey (Kabis-Kechrid 2021, 3). The conciliatory tone in Germany's policy vis-à-vis Turkey regarding the Eastern Mediterranean was, in turn, welcomed by Turkey.

That Germany was among the few countries interested in improving the relations between Ankara and Brussels led Turkey to value Germany's role in settling the Eastern Mediterranean conflict. After the December 2020 EU summit and the

decision just to impose light sanctions, president Erdoğan hailed Germany as among the “reasonable countries in the EU”. İbrahim Kalın, presidential spokesperson and senior advisor to president Erdoğan, stated his belief that “the German mediation has been very helpful, they have been fair” and that “Germans have played a remarkably positive role” (Güzeldere 2020).

## France

Unlike with Germany, Turkey’s relationship with France, which sided clearly with Greece and the RoC, has been more adversarial. In addition to old disagreements such as over the Armenian issue, the Kurdish issue and France’s traditional opposition to Turkey’s EU integration, newer disagreements, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the South Caucasus (involving Armenia and Azerbaijan) and the Libyan and Syrian crises, deepened the divergences between Paris and Ankara (Kabis-Kechrid 2021, 4–7). According to political scientist Jana Jabbour, the squabble between Paris and Ankara in the Eastern Mediterranean is an extension of a larger geopolitical competition between them covering Libya, Syria and Lebanon (Author’s Interview with Dr. Jana Jabbour, Paris, 19 October 2021). Moreover, the lack of a mitigating role of economic factors between the two countries, their divergent attitudes towards political Islam and their competing claims for leadership in the regional affairs exacerbated their rivalry. In essence, French and Turkish interests in the Eastern Mediterranean are diametrically opposed. They criticised each other fiercely following the outbreak of the conflict there. Turkey considered president Emmanuel Macron’s France to be a major stumbling block to Turkish interests in the region. It viewed France as an extra-regional country that had no right to a say in what went on there. Turkey viewed the strong endorsement of the EMGF by Paris and the latter’s coalition with Ankara’s regional rivals as a betrayal and a challenge to its interests (Jabbour 2021, 2–3).

As tensions escalated in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkish president Erdoğan addressed French president Macron sharply. “Do not mess with the Turkish people,” he warned,” adding that “France has no right to criticize Turkey because it also has a colonial past” (Erdoğan Warns Macron ‘Not to Mess with Turkey,’ *France 24*, 12 September 2020). Erdoğan also claimed that France was not entitled to a role in the region since it was not a guarantor state<sup>1</sup> in Cyprus (Başkan Erdoğan: Fransa’nın Doğu Akdeniz’de Söz Hakkı Yok, *Sabah*, 16 June 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> The Treaty of Guarantee is a treaty signed between Cyprus, Turkey, Greece and the United Kingdom and was adopted in 1960. Article IV grants the guarantor states the right to take action to restore the current state of affairs in the Republic of Cyprus.

Turkey sharply attacked France also on the grounds that it emerged as a major supporter of Greece and the RoC in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis through its military cooperation with Greece. In September 2020, amid the escalation of tension with Turkey, Greece unveiled a massive arms purchase programme and a renewal of its armed forces. The programme committed Greece to the addition of 18 French-made Rafale warplanes, four navy helicopters and four multipurpose frigates (Greece Announces “Robust” Arms Deal as Tension with Turkey Rises, *Al Jazeera*, 12 September 2020). According to this programme, 15,000 new troops were to be recruited and resources allocated to the national arms industry and defence against cyberattacks.

## Italy

Turkey has traditionally enjoyed good relations and close economic ties with Italy, whose interests also converged with those of Turkey in Libya, as Italy too backs the GNA. Controlling approximately 45% of the Libyan gas and oil production, the Italian energy giant ENI has its fields largely located in Western Libya, which is controlled precisely by the GNA (Colombo and Vignoli 2020). Despite siding with Greece and the RoC, however, Italy did not endorse tough EU sanctions against Turkey, seeking instead to cultivate better relations.

Parallel to Italy’s balancing approach, Turkey on the other side also adopted a reasoned stance towards Italy, permitting Italy to develop into a major partner during the crisis. This was expressed many times by Turkish officials. At the end of 2020, for instance, Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated that “we consider Italy a strong NATO ally and a balanced partner in regional issues” (Kuzu 2020). Despite these joint interests, however, issues such as Turkish military vessels’ interruption of ENI ships from exploring for gas in the Eastern Mediterranean, along with Rome’s and Ankara’s competition over political influence and economic interests in the former Italian colonies of Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea, have somewhat put limits to Turkish–Italian cooperation.

## Turkey vis-à-vis Russia, the US and China

Inevitably, Russia, the US and China have a variety of immediate and broader general interests in the Eastern Mediterranean region related to political and economic considerations both with immediate bearing and of a broader geostrategic concern. Turkey has different relational dynamics with Russia, the US and

China, which all had their own competing perspectives on the Eastern Mediterranean crisis that flared up in 2018.

## Russia

Turkey would have wanted to see Russia more on its side in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis as a balancing actor against the opposite camp. After all, Turkey had cultivated a multidimensional relationship with Russia and played it off against the West, particularly when its relations with the latter deteriorated in the post-coup period after July 2016. Yet, contrary to Turkey's expectations, its close relations with Russia failed to induce Moscow to take sides in Ankara's favour in the Eastern Mediterranean gas dispute. Russia's energy and defence cooperation agreements in the Eastern Mediterranean region were major blocks to Turkey's hope for Russia's more supportive role towards it.

Some experts have maintained that Turkey's advanced level of cooperation with non-Western countries, notably Russia and China, could bolster Turkey's position in the Eastern Mediterranean. For instance, they argued, Turkey's granting of rights to Russia and China for the construction of military bases and harbours in the TRNC could not only operate as a counterbalance to the US in the region but also re-shape the Eastern Mediterranean issue and help the TRNC gain recognition (Emekli Tuğgeneral Fahri Erenel'den Dengeleri Değiştirecek Öneri: KKTC'de Türk-Rus-Çin Üssü Kurulmalı, *Aydınık*, 12 October 2020). However, given that both Moscow and Beijing have multidimensional relations with the countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, it is questionable whether they would be helpful for Turkey in its desire to change the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Except on one occasion in September 2020, Russia has not sought to play a mediating role in the Eastern Mediterranean dispute because it calculated that the continuation of poor relations between Turkey on one side and the EU and the US on the other would make Ankara more dependent on Russia's support (Jackley 2020). Furthermore, the controversial situation in the Eastern Mediterranean could prove an obstacle to any Eastern Mediterranean gas flowing to European markets and competing with the Russian gas (Bechev 2019). In short, Russia favoured the status quo in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's expectation of a stronger Russian involvement in its favour after 2018 was unlikely to materialise.

The discovery of new gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean is problematic for Russia's energy policy. If the problems of feasibility and political disagreement were resolved, Eastern Mediterranean gas could be shipped to Europe through the EMGP or the Israel-Turkey pipeline (ITP). In the coming years, Europe may still need the Russian gas. Assuming however that demand for gas will drop in the long

term, the entry of the Eastern Mediterranean gas into the European market will further undermine Russia's dominant position (Legucka 2020).

## The US

In contrast to its stance towards Russia, Turkey was critical of US policies regarding the Eastern Mediterranean, which benefited its rivals Greece and the RoC. The US' interest in the region has been driven by geostrategic motives more than by economic interests. Important factors are the rising Chinese and Russian presence in the region in addition to the instability that the Eastern Mediterranean issue caused among its regional allies as well as in the EU.

Turkey's approach to the US in the Eastern Mediterranean dispute was shaped by the attitudes of the relevant states as well as the negative legacy of Turkish-American relations in the past decade. The latter had seen a nadir after the July 2016 coup attempt and the Turkish government's suspicion about the American involvement in the plot. In this context, US prosecutors charged the state-owned Turkish bank *Halkbank* with helping to convert profits from the sales of Iranian oil into gold and then cashing it for the benefit of Iran, thus breaking the US sanctions. The *Halkbank* issue has been an important factor that poisoned the relations between Washington and Ankara.

In addition to this, there were two more crises between the two countries. Between October and December 2017, Turkey detained a Turkish employee in the American Consulate in Istanbul for allegedly being a member of the Fethullah Gülen network, which the AKP government holds responsible for the June 2016 coup attempt. This became a thorn in US–Turkish relations. A year earlier, in October 2016, the arrest of American pastor Andrew Craig Brunson in Turkey strained the bilateral relations when he was charged by a Turkish court with being associated with the PKK and the Fethullah Gülen network as well as espionage. Following the imposition of mutual sanctions, a Turkish court finally released him from custody, and Brunson returned to the US in October 2018. Elsewhere, the extradition of Sunni cleric Fethullah Gülen exacerbated Turkey's antipathy towards the US. In 2019, finally, Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air-defence system despite vocal US objections was the straw that broke the camel's back.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, a series of developments has caused outrage in Turkey. Upon calls from Greece, Cyprus and several other states, the US adopted the bipartisan Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act on 19 December 2020.

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<sup>2</sup> For a review of Turkish–US relations in the last decade, see Ülgen 2021.



With this Act, removing the restrictions on the sale of the non-lethal defence articles and services to the RoC for one year (as noted above), it partially lifted the 33-year-old arms embargo on Cyprus (Prince 2019). The Act authorised Washington to provide new security aid to Cyprus and Greece and to set up an Energy Centre for further cooperation between the US, Greece, Israel and Cyprus. Also in line with this Act, in July 2020, the US announced that it would provide International Military Education and Training to the RoC (U.S. Plans to Provide Cyprus with Military Education, *Ahval*, 8 July 2020). Finally, the US supported the EMGF.

The US' further deepening of defence ties with Greece was a source of concern for Turkey. In May 2019, Greece received 70 OH-58D Kiowa Warrior reconnaissance helicopters and one CH-47 Chinook helicopter from Washington (Greek Takes Delivery of US Helicopters, *Ekathimerini*, 17 May 2019). According to a military protocol of 14 October 2021, Athens granted a military base to Washington in Alexandroupolis, 45 km from the Turkish border (Ozcan 2022). Then, in December 2021, the US State Department approved the sale to Greece of four new frigates worth USD 6.9 billion along with a modernisation project for frigates in the Greek Navy worth USD 2.5 billion (Eckstein 2021).

In response to the US' decision, Turkey demanded that Washington reconsider its partial lifting of the arms embargo on the RoC, warning that this would change “equality and balance” between the Turkish and Greek Cypriots. Turkey also maintained that the US' move would disrupt the attempts for reunification in Cyprus, “poison” regional stability and violate the “spirit of alliance” between the US and Turkey (Fraser and Hadjicostis 2020).

## China

Along with Russia, China was another major power that Turkey looked toward as a potential counterbalance to the EU's and US' support for the Greek and Greek Cypriot positions in the gas dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's decline in relations with the West since the Gezi Park events in the summer of 2013 and the July 2016 coup attempt had seen Turkey tilt towards Eurasianism, which required it to cultivate good relations with non-Western Asian powers, notably Russia, precisely, but also China and Iran, in order to counterbalance the (perceived imperialism of the) West.<sup>3</sup> Like Russia, however, China failed to fulfil Turkey's expectations. There were several reasons for this.

For one, China is a significant emerging economic power on the world stage, but it is not (yet) willing to play a global military and political role. China may be a

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of Turkey's Eurasianism, see Yanık 2019.

developing Pacific and East Asian power, but its hard power (military) reach is not extended to the Atlantic and Middle East—or to the Eastern Mediterranean (Ponížilová 2019, 656). Another consideration for China has been its economic stakes with almost all the disputing parties in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis; it was compelled to tread a fine line in the dispute so as not to harm its own economic interests. Additionally, China is very dependent on energy from the Middle Eastern countries that are involved in the Eastern Mediterranean. This weakens Beijing's leverage over these states (Author's Interview with Prof. Ragıp Kutay Karaca, Istanbul, 18 October 2021).

Turkey in fact is an important economic and trading partner of China with trade between the two countries valued at 21.8 billion USD in 2019 (Trading Economics n.d.). However, Turkey's economic relations with China have become increasingly asymmetrical in favour of the latter in recent years, thus depriving Turkey of any leverage that it might have previously had. China provides Turkey with financial aid, credit and investment, including swap agreements. It gave USD 3.6 billion worth of loans to Turkey to be used in the energy and transportation sectors. The two countries signed a memorandum of understanding in March 2020 worth USD 5 billion to be used by the Turkey Wealth Fund. Established in 2016, the Turkey Wealth Fund (TWF) is the sovereign wealth fund belonging to the Turkish state, which aims to bolster Turkey's strategic assets, increase their value and provide funding for Turkey's strategic investments.

Chinese investments in Turkey, especially in transportation, energy and telecommunication sectors, increased. All this played a major role in muting Turkey's criticisms of China (Author's Interview with Dr. Emre Demir, Ankara, 12 August 2021). Last but not least, in line with its "One China" policy, which considers Taiwan as a part of China, Beijing espouses a united Cyprus, in opposition to Turkey's more recent Cyprus policy (Author's Interview with Prof. Ragıp Kutay Karaca, Istanbul, 18 October 2021).

## Conclusion

Turkey's AKP government was prompted by both domestic and external factors to adopt a more autonomous and assertive policy following the Eastern Mediterranean crisis. It objected to the exploration and exploitation activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, claiming that first a resolution of the Cyprus conflict was needed. Thus, it adopted a "gunboat" diplomacy to protect its interests.

Turkey's response to the positions of the major powers in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis is, by and large, determined by the vested interests these have in the region, by Ankara's maritime foreign policy ideology (*Mavi Vatan*), its rising

military and economic capabilities (recently halted) and the changing international system. Turkey finds the EU to be partial, clearly siding with Greece and the RoC by virtue of their being EU member states. Similarly, Turkey regards the US as standing behind Greece and the RoC and thus as having lost its traditional neutrality. Turkey has found the actions of France, Greece and the RoC to be provocative. It has adopted an uncompromising stance towards them and pointedly has not made any concessions. On the other hand, the German policy and the attitudes of the other countries in the relatively Turkey-friendly camp (Malta, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria and the East and Central European countries) are received well and praised by Turkey.

Importantly, Turkey's expectation to play Russia and China off against Washington and Brussels in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis has gone unrewarded. Moscow's multidimensional ties with the regional countries were the main reason why Ankara could not use Moscow as a bargaining chip against the West. Beijing pursued its economy-focused policies and traditional policy of non-involvement in political controversies outside its own sphere of influence, which mainly remains limited to East Asia and the Pacific. Turkey's growing economic dependence on China and China's Cyprus policy, which aims at creating one Cyprus (analogous to "One China"), has prevented Ankara from looking to Beijing as a balancing actor against the EU and US.

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## Bionote

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