

### Zoltán Egeresi:<sup>1</sup> Escalating tensions between Turkey and Greece: turbulence in the Eastern Mediterranean

#### Executive Summary

- The current tensions between Greece and Turkey stem from the interplay of various debates ranging from Cyprus, minority issues to migration and maritime, airspace delimitation controversies.
- The natural gas field discoveries since the 2000s have transformed the energy landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean, which fuelled debates between Turkey and its neighbours.
- While Aegean disputes were kept usually at bilateral level, now Ankara has to face with multiple actors in the Mediterranean which was accelerated by Turkey's memorandum on maritime delimitation with the Government of National Accord in November 2019.
- Greece was able to strengthen its relation with Turkey's regional rivals, like France, Egypt, Israel and the United Arab Emirates by signing military cooperation agreements or joining naval military drills.
- Although the European Council refrained to adopt hard sanctions against Turkey, its naval manoeuvres in the disputes maritime zones will trigger closer cooperation among its adversaries.
- Despite the bellicose discourse, the potential for armed conflict remains low between the rivals, while proxy wars, especially in Libya keeps serving as fuel for power struggle.
- Even if Ankara decides not enforce its claims against Greece and Cyprus, it will be able to hinder drilling activities and any pipeline construction projects in the contested areas.

#### Introduction

Historically, Greece and Turkey had many controversies ranging from minority issues to border disputes. However, the rivalry between the two neighbours has reached a new level during 2019 and 2020.

Ankara's maritime delimitation agreement with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) signed on 27 November 2019 has been a turning point. The agreement did not only grant a huge portion of Greece's EEZ but also signalled that Ankara was ready to join the regional Great Game which provoked other powers' reactions.<sup>2</sup>

During 2020, Turkey sent survey ships with military escort to the contested area in order to reach an agreement that assures its rights. Meanwhile, Greece tried to secure allies within the region and within the European Union as well. Eastern Mediterranean energy, security and political dynamics helped Athens to strengthen its position, but it was not able – despite the backing of strong allies within the EU – to solve the ongoing maritime question and push Turkey back.

In August 2020, a Greek and a Turkish ship collided,<sup>3</sup> demonstrating that tensions between the two neighbours can escalate further. Although the possibility of a war remains low, the deteriorating relations between Turkey and Greece will trigger negative effects for the whole region and will still remain on the agenda in 2021.

Thus, the paper intends to analyse the main disputes between Greece and Turkey and also outline the two countries' relation within the Eastern Mediterranean context. While the 'traditional' controversies, like border issues in the Aegean basically remained at bilateral level, the sit-

uation is much different in the Mediterranean where the rivalry of two countries has recently become part of the regional power struggle and the result will be shaped by the interplay of various regional actors and the involvement of extra-regional great powers.

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<sup>2</sup> Michaël TANCHUM: [The Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis: A Regional System Perspective on the Mediterranean's new Great Game](#). [online] In: Michaël Tanchum: Eastern Mediterranean in uncharted waters: Perspectives on Emerging Geopolitical Realities. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung 2020. 7-17. [02.01.2021]

<sup>3</sup> [Greek, Turkish warships in 'mini collision' Ankara calls provocative](#). [online] 14.08.2020. Source: Reuters [20.01.2021.]



### Old debates: controversies in Greek-Turkish relations

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Greek – Turkish relations had been usually tense. Even if the interwar period's two charismatic leaders, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Eleftherios Venizelos could conclude a friendship agreement in 1930 in order to mend fences and create a cordial atmosphere between the two states (which led to the establishment of a greater defensive alliance in Southeastern Europe, named Balkan Pact in 1934), the emerging Cyprus issue deteriorated the relations since the beginning of the 1950s. However, not only the fate of the island – inhabited by Turks and Greeks – served as a source of conflict between them.

Since the 1950s, four main issues have shaped the Turkish – Greek relations. Most importantly, the 1) Cyprus issue starting from the involvement of Greece and Turkey in the independence of the island throughout the military intervention of 1974 to the (currently frozen) reunification talks. The 2) minority issue, which led to the degrading situation of Turkish community in Greece and the Greek minority in Turkey; 3) the Aegean dispute which is a set of interrelated debates ranging from the delimitation of maritime, airspace borders to question of demilitarisation of certain islands;<sup>4</sup> and finally 4) a relatively new issue; migration.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Cyprus*

The emerging Greek independence movement in Cyprus inclined the United Kingdom (which seized the island from the Ottoman in 1878) to invite Greece and Turkey to find a solution for the growing secessionism. The negotiations between 1955 and 1959 lead to the Zurich and London agreements which created a bifurcated society where the Turkish community (some 20 percent of the total population) got thirty percent of the parliamentary seats and the post of vice-president. The agreement also granted the Guarantor status for Greece and Turkey and at the same time prohibited the possibility of unification with Greece (Enosis). The settlement did not bring the desired internal peace as nationalism was channelled into state institutions and kept dominating the political sphere. Thus, the country has become a powder keg with high probability of interethnic tensions, and the intervention of the guarantor states in order to protect their respective ethnic kin was hanging over the island as the sword of Damocles. This probability has almost become a reality when the Turkish government started to mobilise its armed forces after clashes began between Greeks and Turks in 1963. Turkey's intervention was hampered by the strong reaction of the United States (the so-called Johnson Letter) which resulted in a massive disillusionment in Ankara. Although the crisis was settled, interethnic violence and growing distrust has not come to an end.<sup>6</sup> The fragile status quo was broken by an Athens-supported military coup which aimed to unify the island with the mainland. The attempt was backed by the then Greek military junta which wanted to overcome the increasing domestic dissatisfaction stemming from the economic and political hardship by this action. Although the plotters had achieved some initial success, like the removal of President Makarios archbishop on 15 July 1974, the almost immediate Turkish response had ruined their plans.<sup>7</sup>

Then Turkish Prime Minister, Bülent Ecevit launched a military intervention (operation Atilla) and occupied the northern part of the island. The Greek Cypriote regime collapsed shortly after, as well as the military junta in Athens. The international community condemned the coup and the Greek attempt for enosis while Turkey could emphasise that its military incursion is based on international law, as it is in line with the Zurich agreement. However, , Turkey launched a new offensive few weeks later, seizing nearly 38 percent of the island. The Turkish offensive was stopped only due to international pressure.

Even though there were some possibility to tackle the problems and restore the independence and territorial integrity of the island, its partition had become permanent. Turkish troops have remained and an exodus took place between the North and South, as Greeks left their homes in the Northern part and Turks migrated from their ethnic enclaves to the occupied territories. International peacekeeping mission

<sup>4</sup> [Issues of Greek - Turkish Relations](#) [online] 18.01.2020. Source: Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs

<sup>5</sup> Minor issues also led to conflicts, such as Greece support for the PKK-leader of Öcalan in the late 1990s.

<sup>6</sup> Péter KACZIBA: "Az"égei hidegháború" utolsó 10 éve A görög-török kapcsolatok az 1990-es években *Mediterrán Világ* 2012. 79-108.

<sup>7</sup> Fatma ÇALIK ORHUN: Reasons Leading To The Cyprus Peace Operation And Developments In The Cyprus Problem After The Operation. Source: *ASOS Journal*, 2019/93 p. 415.

was launched, however only few incidents occurred eventually in the upcoming decades. Rauf Denktaş, the leader of the Turkish Cypriots declared the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) which was only recognised by Ankara. Whereas, the southern part preserved its status as the internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus (RoC).<sup>8</sup>

The unification talks started in the 1990s supported by the UN. Turkish commitment to EU membership at the beginning of 2000s facilitated the rapprochement between the Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities. This opened the way towards a referendum about the unification brokered by then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2004, which ended up in a failure; the Greek side refused while the Turks voted in favour of the unification. The island managed to join the EU in the same year without solving the issue which overshadowed Turkey's membership aspirations. Cyprus started to use its position within the EU to hamper Turkish accession efforts. Thus, by the end of 2006, Nicosia had managed to freeze the negotiation on several chapters of the accession only one year after the talks began.

The reunification negotiations continued, but faced several challenges and pressure from Ankara and Athens as well. Although the parties managed to come to an understanding over several issues, the changing geopolitical context in the Eastern Mediterranean hindered further rapprochement. The last round of official negotiations ended in August 2017 on the Crans Montana Cyprus conference without any breakthrough. The Turkish and Greek Cypriot leaders met in Berlin informally to reaffirm their commitment to create a bi-communal federation. The 2020 presidential elections in TRNC brought the victory of the Turkey-backed candidate, Ersin Tatar who is a champion of the two-state solution. As a hardliner, he may take actions which can fuel tensions, like the opening of the sealed-off beachfront of Varosha,<sup>9</sup> but Nicosia's reluctance to reach a final agreement hardly facilitate the situation.

### *Minority issue and cultural heritage*

As a consequence of the deepening crisis in the South which led to the intervention of Turkey in 1974, the situation has become alarming for the Greek and Turkish minorities... Although the overwhelming majority of these groups was transferred to their kinstate in the framework of a Greek-Turkish population exchange at the end of the Turkish independence war (1919-1922), around 100 000 Greek still remained in Istanbul and roughly the same number of Turks stayed in Western Thrace, near the common border.<sup>10</sup>

The Cyprus question fuelled mutual distrust and hostile sentiments. After news about a vandal attack against Atatürk's house in Thessaloniki appeared in Turkish media, pogroms started against Greek shops. The events lasted for two days (5-6 September, 1955) and harmed the majority of Greek owners. The rising tensions and deteriorating situation led to an exodus of Greeks from Istanbul whose number currently converges to several hundred.

The discriminatory policy was mirrored in Greece. As the country does not recognise any minority groups based on their ethnicity, but only on their religion (thus everyone is considered as Greek), the Turkish community could not organise itself. Furthermore, the authorities tried to facilitate emigration. Since the 1960s, thousands of Turks lost their citizenship and were prohibited to return their home once they left the country.<sup>11</sup> The unfavourable policy contributed to their emigration to Turkey and Western Europe. Yet, their number is still above 100 000. Although, the rapprochement of Turkey and Greece in the late 1990s and early 2000s eased their situation, the rising antagonism thanks to the border disputes, Eastern Mediterranean politics and regional ambitions changed the circumstances again, not for the better.

Despite its domestic political consideration, the decision to turn Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya) and Chora museums (which were the symbols of Greek orthodox legacy in Istanbul) into mosques in the summer of 2020, was also slammed by Greece. Seeing as an attack against its cultural heritage and Christianity, even church bells were ringing in mourning for Hagia Sophia all around the country.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> However, Turkey refused to recognise and the country is referred to as Administration of Southern Cyprus (Güney Kıbrıs Rum Yönetimi).

<sup>9</sup> Cihan DİZDAROĞLU: [The Northern Cyprus Election's Implications for the Prospects of a Settlement on the Island](#) [online] 3.12.2020. Source: German Marshall Fund [20.01.2021.]

<sup>10</sup> The population exchange was rather based on religion than ethnicity. Greek speaking Muslims and Turkish speaking Orthodox Christians were also transferred to the other country.

<sup>11</sup> Ádám BALOGH: A görög-török kapcsolatok története: változás és kontinuitás a görög külpolitikában az 1970-es évektől napjainkig. Source: Limes, 2008/4

<sup>12</sup> [Church bells ring to mourn the conversion of Hagia Sophia](#) [online] 24.07.2020. Source: Greek City Times. [20.01.2021.]

### *Border disputes*

Despite the increasingly antagonistic relations, the parties did not dispute their common borders, outlined by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and Treaty of Paris (1947).. The Treaty of Lausanne determined the width of territorial waters in 3 nautical miles, and the two treaties have rendered almost all island and islets under Greek sovereignty, even if they were just one and a half kilometre far from the Turkish coast, like in the case of the small island of Megisti (Castellorizo), which – just to make everything more complicated – is located in the Mediterranean Sea and not in the Aegean.

Nevertheless, the evolution of international law reflecting to the technological developments had tremendous effect on the existing status quo. International agreements since the 1950s have introduced the concepts of continental shelf, Exclusive Economic Zones etc. which has created more controversy in the case of the Aegean Sea.<sup>13</sup>In 1936, Greece unilaterally determined its territorial waters in 6 nautical miles from the coast, which meant that around 40 percent of the Aegean Sea fell under Greek jurisdiction. Based on the then cordial relations, this decision was not contested by Ankara. In 1964, Turkey also accepted the implementation of the 6 nm rule for the Aegean Sea while it set 12 nm the width for its territorial water in the case of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. This decision increased the share of Turkey in the Aegean to some 7 percent.

The disputes appeared later, when economic and political incentives pushed the two sides to enlarge their jurisdiction in order to benefit from possible resources and to tackle rising security considerations as well. In 1973, as a response to the ongoing petrol crisis which hit its economy deeply, Turkey sent drilling ships to the proximity of Aegean Greek islands declaring that they do not possess an own continental shelf, thus their waters belongs to the Anatolian one and as such, Turkey has the right to exert jurisdiction.<sup>14</sup> These claims were refuted by Athens arguing that the islands had their own continental shelf, thus the continental shelf should be delimited along the median line between the Turkish mainland and the islands/islets. In order to end the dispute, Greece turned to the International Court of Justice, but Turkey did not recognise the jurisdiction of the ICJ, which thus had to declare itself incompetent in addressing the legal issue.

Later, after signing the UNCLOS in 1995, Greece declared that it had the right to extend its territorial water to 12 n miles at anytime. The implementation of this would have granted Athens control over some 70 percent of the Aegean Sea. Taking into consideration that several Greek islands (such as Lesbos, Chios, Rhodes) are situated just few kilometres from the Turkish shores, this would hamper the free movement of Turkish warships from the Black Sea or Izmir to the Mediterranean.<sup>15</sup>In response to the Greek act, the Turkish parliament accepted a resolution that threatened Greece with war in case of the extension of territorial water beyond 6 nm.<sup>16</sup> Due to the Turkish pressure, Athens postponed the implementation of the 12 nm rule, but the two sides could not close the dispute.

In parallel to the maritime delimitation problems, airspace had also become a contested domain between the parties. Greece set its airspace boundaries at 10 nm which did not coincide with its territorial waters. Ankara refused to accept the Greek claims, thus after 1974 a great number of incidents occurred between the two countries around the contested areas. The overflights caused several accidents over time.

The demilitarisation of the islands also appeared on the agenda on both sides when Greece installed military forces on some islands, near to the Turkish coast in 1974 in order to broaden its defensive capabilities against any possible Turkish attacks. Ankara criticized this move stating that it had no such intention and perceived Greece's act as a hostile move.

The growing number of border disputes, especially after 1974 drove the two countries to the brink of war numerous times. In 1987, Athens sent drilling ships to the contested waters, a move that made Ankara

<sup>13</sup> The Convention on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone and the Convention on the Continental Shelf (both signed in 1958) recognised the states' right to exploit the hydrocarbons resources on their territorial waters and continental shelves. The 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) allowed the jurisdiction over 200 nautical miles which led to the establishment of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).

<sup>14</sup> Turkey did not sign the Convention on the Continental Shelf.

<sup>15</sup> Didier ORTOLLAND: [The Greco-Turkish dispute over the Aegean Sea : a possible solution?](#) [10.04.2009] Source: Diploweb [20.01.2021.]

<sup>16</sup> [Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Genel Kurul Tutanağı 19. Dönem 4. YasamaYılı 121. Birleşim 08 Haziran 1995 Perşembe](#) [online] 08.06.1995. Source: Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi [20.01.2021.]

anxious. The strong intervention of NATO solved the crisis by forcing Greece to leave the area but failed to reach a final agreement. A few years later, in 1996 the two countries found themselves in a major conflict because of the small islet of Karnak/Imia located near the Turkish coast. The issue was settled by the intervention of the United States and the two sides returned to the status quo ante again.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Turkey expressed its claims for more small islets stating that they are part of a grey zone the status of which was not determined by any treaty. Thus even if they are not part of Turkey, they cannot be under Greek jurisdiction either.

### *Migration*

Although irregular migration did not constitute a 'historical' dispute between the two countries, the rising number of illegal border crossings via sea and land put more and more burden on Greece in the last more than a decade. Due to the wars in its proximity, during the 2000s and 2010s, Turkey has become a transit country for thousands of Afghans, Iraqis etc. While Turkey signed the 1951 Geneva Convention with territorial delimitations, - meaning, only migrants coming from Europe could get the refugee status - these people had no option other than wait for their transfer to a Western country or choose a hazardous journey towards Europe.

In order to tackle the growing irregular land migration, Athens has built already a cement and barbed-wire fence at the border in 2012. Nevertheless the Syrian civil war has altered these dynamics, as in 2015 almost one million people crossed the sea, a situation the Greek authorities were unprepared to handle. The crisis was settled after two EU-Turkey summits, the parties finally struck the so-called 'migration deal' in March 2016.<sup>18</sup>

The statement envisaged a number of benefits for Turkey and outlined the implementation of the '1+1' rule which guaranteed the transfer of irregular migrants back to the Anatolian coast. The EU-supported cooperation between Greece and Turkey decreased the number of irregular migrants for the upcoming years, even though the refugee situation on the Greek islands due to the inadequate accommodation led to clashes several times. The poor conditions showed that the EU has to give more support to Athens to tackle the issue.

As the refugee crisis peaked in Europe in 2015-16, and the need for a common response started to emerge, the irregular migration between Turkey and Greece has become an EU issue. Consequently, disagreements between Turkey and the EU could potentially raise the pressure on the Greek borders, as it happened throughout the months of February and March in 2020. In late February, Turkey opened its border and in a few-week-period several thousand migrants tried to enter Greece near Edirne.<sup>19</sup> Due to effective countermeasures, Greece repelled the attempts and only a few hundred persons managed to cross the border eventually.

There were certain periods when the two sides had more opportunity to reach an agreement. The late 1990s eased the existing tensions due to Ankara's efforts to join the European Union and Greece's openness, which was demonstrated in the form of the "earthquake diplomacy" in the aftermath of the 1999 Istanbul earthquake and later following the Athens earthquake respectively. Nevertheless, despite the relatively cordial relations, they failed to end the disputes.

During the 2010s, when the relations between the EU and Turkey had become more restrained and the negotiation talks reached a deadlock, the lasting Greek - Turkish tensions resurfaced again. Even Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's landmark visit as president to Greece in December 2017 led to a minor crisis; his suggestions about the need for 'updating' the Treaty of Lausanne and his visit to the Turkish minority inhabited area in Western Thrace fuelled the quarrels further between the two countries instead of appeasing them.<sup>20</sup> In face of maritime and air border disputes, military overflights stemming from a middle-

<sup>17</sup> Serdar Ş GÜNER: Aegean Territorial Waters Conflict: An Evolutionary Narrative. Source: Conflict Management and Peace Science, 2004/4

<sup>18</sup> EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016. [online] 18.03.2016. Source: European Council [20.01.2021.]

<sup>19</sup> Refugees pushed from both sides of the Turkey-EU border [online] 05.03.2020. Source: Deutsche Welle [20.01.2021.]

<sup>20</sup> Greece and Turkey trade barbs as Erdogan visits Athens [online] 7.12.2017. Source: Reuters. [20.01.2021.]

power having global ambitions Greece tried to engage more actively with EU and NATO allies.<sup>21</sup> The unsuccessful attempts to mend fences and the two countries' actions to find regional allies stirred new conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2020.

### Turkey: opting for an assertive foreign policy

One driver in the change of the status quo in the Eastern Mediterranean and the rising Greek – Turkish tensions was Turkey itself. Several factors contributed to the increasingly active and assertive foreign policy of Turkey such as 1) the discoveries of significant natural gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean, 2) in a region with already long-standing disputes (over the case of Cyprus for instance), 3) the domestic incentives within Turkey and 4) the growing Turkish capabilities for an (increasingly) militarized foreign policy.

#### *Discoveries: changing energy landscape in the Eastern Mediterranean*

The natural gas field discoveries started in the late 2000s in Israel, followed by Cyprus and Egypt (Table 1.). These have changed the given countries' energy structure and aspired them to become gas exporters. In the upcoming years (along with new discoveries), these countries tried to strengthen energy cooperation and build infrastructure to benefit from the huge reserves.<sup>22</sup>

Gas field	Country	Year of discovery	Amount of gas (estimates)
Aphrodite	Cyprus	2011	129 bcm
Calypso	Cyprus	2018	170-230 bcm
Glaucus	Cyprus	2019	142-227 bcm
Zohr	Egypt	2015	850 bcm
Leviathan	Israel	2010	605 bcm
Tamar + Tamar SW	Israel	2009	318 bcm
Talos	Greece	2019	280bcm

**Table 1. Major gas fields and their discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>23</sup>**

Their aim was to open the way towards the EU market. In order to facilitate their cooperation, new mechanisms were established with the participation of some EU countries as well. The main development was the opening of Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in early 2019 with the goal to create a regional gas market with the participation of Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, Jordan, Italy and the Palestinian Authority.<sup>24</sup>The non-invitation of other littoral countries, like Lebanon, Libya, Syria and Turkey pointed out that these states are left out of the regional gas business which was a clear message to Ankara that feared being encircled.

Although the already existing Egyptian LNG terminals give a good opportunity for gas transport, Greece, Cyprus and Israel with the backing of the European Union concluded an agreement to build a 1900 km long gas pipeline from Israel via Cyprus and Greece to Italy with a cost estimated around 6 billion euros.<sup>25</sup>Taking into account the current gas prices, the feasibility of the project is highly questionable<sup>26</sup> even though political considerations likely overwrite economic logic.

<sup>21</sup> Dimitrios TRIANTAPHYLLOU: Greek Foreign Policy in Defence of the National Interest: Teetering between Exceptionalism and Integration. Source: Uluslararası İlişkiler, Volume 15, No. 58, 2018, 107-117.

<sup>22</sup> Péter KACZIBA: Törökország fekete-tengeri gázfeltárásai – Lehetőségek, korlátok és regionális vonatkozások, Pólusok 2020/ 1., 176-192.

<sup>23</sup> Tamás Kozma: Turkey and the Geopolitics of Natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean. 13.04.2020. [online] Source: TRENDS Research and Advisory. Insights [20.01.2021.]

<sup>24</sup> [Eastern Mediterranean countries to form regional gas market](#) [online] 14.01.2020. Source: Reuters [20.01.2021.]

<sup>25</sup> [Greece, Israel, Cyprus, move to build East Med gas pipeline](#) [online] 2.01.2020. Source: Aljazeera [20.01.2021.]

<sup>26</sup> Ioannis N. GRIGORIADIS: [The Eastern Mediterranean as an Emerging Crisis Zone: Greece and Cyprus in a Volatile Regional Environment](#) [online] In: Michaël Tanchum: Eastern Mediterranean in uncharted waters: Perspectives on Emerging Geopolitical Realities. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung 2020. 35-30. [02.01.2021]

### *Long lasting border disputes*

While the discovery of natural gas reserves opened the way towards major energy cooperation, it also deepened the already existing but less visible border disputes in the region. The reduced US presence in the region also helped various actors to become more active benefiting from the existing power vacuum.<sup>27</sup> The unresolved Cyprus issue gave the opportunity to Turkey to interfere in the fate of Cyprus' gas reserve. Ankara wanted to ensure the TRNC's rights over the island's gas reserves. Thus, it signed a maritime delineation agreement with Northern Cyprus in 2011, just after the discovery of the Aphrodite field. While the TRNC wants to benefit from the prospective gas transport, Nicosia already indicated that the Northern part can count on the gas transport revenues only after the conclusion of the reunification negotiations talks

Countries	Date
Cyprus-Egypt	2003
Cyprus-Lebanon	2007*
Cyprus-Israel	2010
Turkey-TRNC	2011
Turkey-Libya (GNA)	2019
Greece-Italy	2020
Greece-Egypt	2020

\*not ratified by Lebanon

### **2. Table Maritime delimitation agreements in the Eastern Mediterranean**

Despite many delimitation agreements concluded after 2000 (Table 2), several countries from the region still have their own maritime border disputes. Lebanon questions some part of the Israeli maritime border. There is a longstanding debate concerning the Greek and Libyan maritime frontier too. Furthermore, several states, such as Turkey, Libya, Israel and Syria did not sign the UNCLOS which might weaken the applicability of UNCLOS for the region, even if several actors, like Greece or Cyprus are pressing it.

### *Domestic incentives*

The Turkish domestic political landscape went through tangible transformation since 2015 which can be described as swinging to the right and resulting in a more assertive foreign policy. This change was accelerated by the 2016 coup attempt, after which AKP has made a compromise with the radical right National Action Party (MHP) in order to realize the constitutional change. Their coalition has remained stable and facilitated the emergence of a more nationalistic agenda. In line with the consecutive interventions in Syria to weaken the PKK-affiliated PYD, the diplomatic parlance has become more militant. The claim for securing national interest and security has become a cornerstone of the foreign policy coupled with the aim to restore imperial grandeur despite the economic troubles.<sup>28</sup>

The failed coup attempt also helped this process, as it did not only result in the purge of the Gülenist movement affiliated persons (deemed as members of the terrorist organisation called FETÖ), but accelerated the rehabilitation process of those who were sentenced by the Ergenekon and Balyoz probes in late 2000s and early 2010s. As a result, many military officers, even admirals and generals were able to continue their career and even establish closer relations with the AKP establishment. In the given domestic political circumstances and rising tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, the notion of 'Mavi Vatan' or Blue Homeland (coined first by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz in 2006 and used by Admiral Cihat Yaycı later) could gain

<sup>27</sup> George X. PROTOPAPAS: [The new Maritime Order and Greek perspective in the Eastern Mediterranean](#). [online] 24.07.2017. Source: KEDISA [20.01.2021.]

<sup>28</sup> Sinan ULGEN: [A Weak Economy Won't Stop Turkey's Activist Foreign Policy](#). [online] 06.10.2020. Source: Foreign Policy [20.01.2021.]

momentum.<sup>29</sup> Turkish high-ranking military officers and politicians, including Recep Tayyip Erdoğan started to use the notion. The trajectory of the doctrine was demonstrated by a huge maritime military drill with the participation of 103 ships in the spring of 2019 which was named Mavi Vatan.<sup>30</sup> During 2019 and 2020, the Mavi Vatan map (see Map 1.) and concept had become a legitimizing tool for Turkish diplomatic moves, consequently, the maritime agreement with the GNA was interpreted as a step towards the realisation of the doctrine.

The concept rendered all neighbouring maritime zone under Turkish jurisdiction based on the continental shelf and EEZ without taking into consideration the Greek islands or Cyprus's claims. Thus, Ankara signalled that it had the right for a sizable part of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean as well (even though the islands would remain under Greek sovereignty) which neglected the UNCLOS signed by Athens and Nicosia, too. The Mavi Vatan is asserting control over some 462 000 km<sup>2</sup> maritime zone and altogether extended the Turkish sovereignty from less than 50 000 km<sup>2</sup> to some 190 000 km<sup>2</sup> in the Eastern Mediterranean.



**Map 1. Turkey's Blue homeland<sup>31</sup>**

### *Growing capabilities*

Turkey have been heavily investing in its military capabilities for decades, and recent developments showed that its endeavours started to bear fruits. During the previous years, it was able to conduct a number of military operations beyond its borders, first and foremost in Syria. But also in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, where it demonstrated the potential of the mercenary Syrian troops and the modern Turkish warfare, especially in the field of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

The MILGEM ('National Ship') project that was launched in the 1990s but gained impetus in mid-2000s, managed to produce the first Turkey-made indigenous warship in 2008. Until now, several other warships were built and the project has evolved from a shipbuilding programme to a more complex one where sub-systems, sensors etc. are also produced by Turkish companies.

Ankara signed agreements with Pakistan (2019) and Ukraine (2020) to sell four-four MILGEM corvettes<sup>32</sup> respectively. This also points to the growing cooperation with these countries and testifies that Turkey's military technology reached a higher reputation. The country sold more than 130 military ships among others to Malaysia, Georgia, Egypt, Indonesia, Qatar and Turkmenistan.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> [Mavi Vatan nasıl doğdu? Doktrinin mimarları Cem Gürdeniz ve Cihat Yaycı anlatıyor.](#) [10.09.2020.] Source: BBC [20.01.2021.]

<sup>30</sup> 'Mavi Vatan'daki dev tatbikat göz kamaştırdı. [online] 07.03.2019. Source: Anadolu Ajansı [20.01.2021.]

<sup>31</sup> [12 dilde 'Mavi Vatan' haritası](#) [online] 15.20.2020. Source: Aydınlık [20.01.2021.]

<sup>32</sup> Burak Ege BEKDİL: [Ukraine to buy Turkish warships, co-produce drones](#) [online] 01.12.2020. Source: Defense News [20.01.2021.]

<sup>33</sup> [The rise of the Turkish naval industry](#) [online] 21.09.2020. Source: Defense News. [20.01.2021.]

In 2021, it is expected to finish the first Turkish light aircraft carrier, named TCG Anadolu with a length of 232 meter and the capability to operate 30 aircraft, including UAVs.<sup>34</sup> The new flagship will increase the operability of the Turkish navy in the Mediterranean.

Furthermore, military technology advancement was also paralleled by the establishment of military bases beyond Turkey's borders in Somalia, Qatar and since the beginning of 2020, in Libya. To strengthen its military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, it transformed the Geçitkale air base (located in Northern Cyprus) into an UAV air base in December 2019.<sup>35</sup>

### Turkey: challenging the status quo

Turkey's involvement in the Libyan conflict clearly marked the assertive turn in its foreign policy and also changed the dynamics of the Eastern Mediterranean. Even if Ankara's interest in the war-torn country is not a novelty,<sup>36</sup> its siding with the Tripoli-based government outlined its determination to counterbalance its geopolitical rivals.<sup>37</sup> It signed two memoranda with the Fayed al-Sarraj on 27 November 2019, one about military cooperation and one about maritime border delimitation.<sup>38</sup> At the beginning of 2020, the Turkish parliament decided to send troops to the war-ravaged country. At a quick pace, Ankara emerged as a strong actor in Libya which was considered to be part of European countries' and Egypt's sphere of influence until then.

Ankara's diplomatic and military manoeuvres provoked international limelight and criticism. Although the internationally recognised government in Tripoli could count on Turkey's support, its adversary, General Haftar-led Libyan National Army (LNA) was backed by Egypt, the UAE and several European countries, like France also tried to establish good relations with him. To make the already labyrinthian situation more complex, Russia also appeared in the country and supported the LNA.

According to the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Ankara and the Tripoli-based government, Turkish troops will provide training and intelligence support to their Libyan counterpart. So far, the number of Turkish soldiers has remained low. According to the first news, some 35 troops were already sent to the North African country,<sup>39</sup> however, it was not only the TAF troops which changed the dynamics of the conflict, but the brigades from the Syrian National Army, too. The sources vary about their numbers, but it may be between 1600 and 10 000 indicating Ankara's determination to support its newfound ally. Beyond the troops, Turkey also provides the GNA with ammunition and weapons.<sup>40</sup>

After the decision to send the military to Libya, Turkey also started drilling activities in the South, which opened a new quarrel with Greece as the Turkey – GNA agreement would render a portion of gas field near Crete to Libya and Turkey. Although news about huge reserves of the Talos field (found just prior the November 2019 agreement) were downplayed by the Hellenic Petroleum Company, the natural gas field raises the stakes even higher in the region.<sup>41</sup>

### The Greek response

<sup>34</sup> TCG Anadolusun durum | Yunanistan'ın uykuları kaçacak! Türkiye'nin en büyük savaş gemisinde sona doğru. 23.12.2020. [online] Source: Ahaber [20.01.2021.]

<sup>35</sup> Hay Eytan Cohen YANARCAK: Turkey's Giant Leap: Unmanned Aerial Vehicles [online] Source:Turkeyscope Vol. 4, No. 6, July - August 2020. [20.01.2021.]

<sup>36</sup> Concerning the background Turkish-Libyan relations, it is worth mentioning that Turkish companies were already active before 2011 in country. Robust construction holdings entered in the country during the 1970s which played in important role in strengthening their international standing. Libya was a valuable market among the international partners, as it had some 15 Billion dollar investment from Turkey. This flourishing economic relations, along with the 20 thousand Turkish workers being in Libya made Erdogan's decision about turning its back to Khadafi's regime more difficult. Thus, Turkey was an unwilling ally to join the common NATO efforts to establish a no-fly zone. After a few weeks, it allowed to use a Turkish maritime base and it sent some warship but it intended to diminish its direct involvement in the conflict. By the end of the summer 2011, when the rebels took control over the majority of the country and Khadafi lost its control, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu visited Libya and he announced its country's support for the new political leadership. Although in 2014 the Government of National Accord was formed - which got Turkey and the international communities' support -, the armed conflict was resumed after the declaration of Libyan Parliament based on Tobruk which apparently demonstrated the East-West division in the country. In the new civil war, Ankara decided to side with the GNA.

<sup>37</sup> Emrah KEKILLI: Akdeniz'de Türkiye-Libya Stratejik İttifakı. [online] 30.11.2020. Source: SETA

<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the Libyan parliament has not ratify them yet.

<sup>39</sup> Türk askeri Libya'da. [online] 8.1.2020. Source: Sabah [20.01.2021.]

<sup>40</sup> Nikolett PÉNZVÁLTÓ: Törökország líbiai háborúja [online] Source: Horizont 2020/02. [20.01.2021.]

<sup>41</sup> Hellenic plays down reports of gas find off Crete. [online] 31.10.2019. Source: Reuters [20.01.2021.]

### *Mending fences and making alliances*

Greece's position within the European Union and in world politics were shaken by the eurocrisis which resulted in an EU-wide financial turmoil. Athens has become more dependent from EU support. – More importantly, the Greek government was not in a position to fend off pressures to fulfil EU-dictated conditions. The austerity measures necessitated by Brussels led to mass protests and growing social tensions. This situation was aggravated even more by the endeavours of the Tzipras-government in 2015 to renegotiate the terms, which ended up as a disaster. The economic weaknesses were paralleled by domestic political difficulties while the 2015-16 migration crises also put the country on the spotlight. Hundreds of thousands people, mostly Syrians departing from the Anatolian coast and reaching the Greek islands via the Balkan routes the core of the EU proved that Athens was not able to stop the mass flow of irregular migrants.

Despite the permanent crises during the first years of 2010s, Greece managed to stabilise its position in the international arena. It solved the more than two-decade-long naming dispute with Macedonia.<sup>42</sup> The Mitsotakis-government also demonstrated its ability to cope with foreign challenges by successfully stopping the new wave of migrants in February-March 2020. It also managed to ameliorate its relations with the United States.<sup>43</sup>

The major natural gas discoveries in its geopolitical proximity also affected the Greek foreign policy. As the support of Cyprus is a cornerstone within Athens' diplomatic agenda, it backed Nicosia with its border disputes with Turkey. Furthermore, the location of the gas fields also paved the way towards the possibility to strengthen its position as a transit country which may link the Eastern Mediterranean gas fields with other EU markets.<sup>44</sup> All in all, Athens presented itself as a strong supporter for any planned pipeline traversing its territories.

Furthermore, the location of Greek islands granted the country with sizable maritime areas within the Eastern Mediterranean in accordance with the international law. Even though it had minor disputes with Italy and Libya and major ones with Turkey, the enormous maritime zone under its jurisdiction potentially encompasses great natural gas reserves (like the Talos field). Taking into consideration its limited financial room for manoeuvre and the geopolitical circumstances, Athens followed Cyprus' policy and gave Western companies the right for survey activities within its maritime blocs. The participation of American, French, Italian etc. energy companies in the drillings also strengthened the alliance with their respective countries. By these business ties Nicosia managed to persuade France to intervene in the power struggle in the region to defend its interests; and Athens did the same.

While, Greece was making efforts to involve EU powers to defend its national interests via economic incentives, it also managed to strengthen its relations with other Eastern Mediterranean actors. It took part in the establishment of the Greece – Cyprus – Israel and the Greece – Cyprus – Egypt trilateral cooperation. Although the preliminary aim of these mechanisms was to reinforce cooperation in the field of energy (possible exploitation of gas resources and more importantly their import towards the European markets), they evolved into a more complex relation. Joint military drills with Egypt and Israel have become frequent during the previous years. Athens also joined the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum at the beginning of 2020 which infuriated Ankara.

### *Reactions to the Turkish challenge after November 2019*

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<sup>42</sup> While at the beginning of 1990s, Greece was making huge diplomatic efforts to hinder its small neighbour to be integrated in international organisations under its own name. The time for change arrived when Zoran Zaev became the Prime Minister and his left-wing government has given a new impetus to the EU and NATO accession negotiations which was indispensable without solving the naming dispute. This time, Athens tended to be more cooperative, thus Alexis Tzipras and Zaev could conclude in mind-2018 the Prespa Agreement which delineated the notions of Macedonia and Macedonian culture and history and gave the name North-Macedonia to the small Balkan country. The Greek parliament accepted the agreement in 2019 thus North-Macedonia could join the NATO in March 2020 and begin its accession negotiation with the EU. By solving the long-lasting dispute, Greece could strengthen its position in the Balkans and make a step to reposition itself as a security-provider in the region.

<sup>43</sup> Dimitar BECHEV: Greece Is Getting Good at Geopolitics. [online] 25.07.2019. Source: Foreign Policy [20.01.2021.]

<sup>44</sup> It is also important to note that Greece is also a transit country for the TANAP pipeline coming from Azerbaijan via Turkey.

Ankara's growing support for the GNA oriented Athens towards Eastern Libya. Although Greece recognised the government and reopened its embassy in Tripoli in 2015, it also established closer ties with Tobruk which has given some concessions to Greek companies.<sup>45</sup> The modus vivendi with Tripoli was overwritten by the Turkey – GNA maritime delimitation agreement which received strong criticism from Greece. The GNA's ambassador to Athens was summoned by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and a couple of days later, expelled from the country. In January 2020, Khalifa Haftar visited Athens and assured the Greek government that he would not recognise the Turkish – Libyan maritime borders while Prime Minister Mitsotakis announced that Greece "will never accept a political solution for Libya that does not require the cancellation" of the GNA – Turkey agreement.<sup>46</sup>

Despite its efforts, Athens was not invited to the Berlin conference. In reciprocity, it managed to find strong EU allies, notably France to support its position. The Operation IRINI (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI) which replaced the Operation SOPHIA on 31 March 2020, was shaped in line with Greek interests: its declared aim was to prevent arms trafficking to Libya. While the EU-forces controlled a vast sea zone which practically hindered the Turkish weapon transports, the arms trade via land and air through Egypt to Benghazi has remained intact, creating a beneficial situation for Haftar in combating the Turkish – GNA alliance.<sup>47</sup>

Not surprisingly, the IRINI was slammed by Turkey and some other EU countries as well. In May, Malta withdrew from the mission by pointing out to the discrepancies and inadequacy of the mission in stopping the inflow of weapons to Libya and handling the irregular migration.<sup>48</sup>

As earlier, Athens made greater efforts to find allies within and beyond the European Union. In May, at a videoconference, the foreign ministers of Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, France and the United Arab Emirates condemned Turkey's activities in the Eastern Mediterranean such as its drilling in Cyprus' EEZ and its agreement with the GNA.<sup>49</sup> However, Israel did not join the event as a gesture to open the door to rapprochement with Turkey.<sup>50</sup>

On 9 June 2020, Greece and Italy signed an EEZ delimitation agreement based on the UNCLOS by confirming the right of Greek islands in the area to maritime zones.<sup>51</sup> The move demonstrated that international law and cooperative stance can handle the existing disputes even with a price of minor modification.<sup>52</sup>

After mid-summer Turkish drilling activities and dogfights around Kastellorizo, Athens concluded an agreement with Egypt to demarcate their EEZs' boundary in line with the UNCLOS, recognising that islands have their continental shelves – strongly opposing the Turkish concept, again.<sup>53</sup> Ankara's reaction was to send again drilling ships to the contested area. By the end of August, Kastellorizo has become a flashpoint, especially when two ships collided. In this crisis, Germany's efforts to mitigate the tensions and resume the dialogue between the two countries<sup>54</sup> led to limited success, and its reconciliatory attitude helped to de-escalate the conflict.

Greece entered in the emerging Eastern Mediterranean Great Game by building new alliances and seeking to isolate Turkey. Whereas its close relations with Cyprus and its rapprochement to Israel and Egypt were the result of converging economic interests, Athens' emerging cooperation with the United Arab Emirates – which also increased its presence in the region by supporting Khalifa Haftar's forces and signing the Abraham Accords peace agreement with Israel – stemmed from the latter's geopolitical rivalry with Turkey.

<sup>45</sup> Péter KACZIBA: A líbiai polgárháború szerepe a görög-török konfliktus elmélyülésében, *Pólusok* 2020/ 1., 47-82.

<sup>46</sup> Haftar 'agrees' to tear up Libya-Turkey maritime deal: Greece [online] 17.01.2020. Source: Euronews [20.01.2021.]

<sup>47</sup> Nikolett PÉNZVÁLTÓ – Márk VARGHA: (Ne) folytassa, Sophia! – Az Irini művelet kilátásai [online] Source: Horizont 2020/12 [20.01.2021.]

<sup>48</sup> Malta rattles EU with Irini withdrawal, Macron and Merckel's schedule calls [online] 10. 05. 2020. Source: MaltaToday [20.01.2021.]

<sup>49</sup> Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, France, UAE denounce Turkish activities in EastMed [online] 11.05.2020. Source: Ekathimerini [20.01.2021.]

<sup>50</sup> Giovanni GIACALONE: Israel and Turkey rebuilding ties? [online] 11.06.2020. Source: KEDISA [20.01.2021.]

<sup>51</sup> Greece, Italy sign accord on maritime zones in Ionian Sea [online] 09.06.2020. Source: Reuters [20.01.2021.]

<sup>52</sup> Ioannis N. GRIGORIADIS - Lennart T. BELKE: UNCLOS and the Delimitation of Maritime Zones in the Eastern Mediterranean [online] 17.09.2020. Source: ELIAMEP [20.01.2021.]

<sup>53</sup> Greece-Egypt Maritime Deal Aimed at Stemming Turkish Designs in Eastern Mediterranean [online] 07.08.2020. Source: Voanews [20.01.2021.]

<sup>54</sup> Germany's Maas calls on Greece and Turkey to avoid 'catastrophe' [online] 25.08. 2020. Source: Deutsche Welle [20.01.2021.]

Greek strategy in the given circumstances focused on bringing other powers to the dispute, especially the European Union and the United States. As the European Union approved sanctions against Turkey because of its seismic surveys in Cypriot waters in mid-2019 already, the delineation agreement with the GNA also raised concerns.

Thus, the growing involvement of the EU strengthened Athens position vis-à-vis Ankara. It found allies in France and Austria which urged the European Council to make sanctions against Turkey's activities (deemed as illegal) in Greek waters. France's Med7 summit with the participation of seven Mediterranean countries pushed for an antagonistic stance against Turkey in late September 2020.<sup>55</sup>

The Turkish government's response was to ease the tension by withdrawing its vessels. However, after the October 2020 European Council summit the survey activities were resumed triggering the same criticism. The 10-11 December EU summit, again condemned the Turkish manoeuvres, but refrained to impose harsh sanctions. While Greece, Cyprus and France were pushing again for embargo on arms sales,<sup>56</sup> several countries were against the step.<sup>57</sup> This reluctance shows that even though the relations are tense, Turkey manages to build enough leverage within the EU to prevent a harsh economic reaction – at least for the short run. Here Germany is a key factor whose complex relation with Turkey grants Ankara some room for manoeuvre. Some countries, which were proven to be more understanding toward the Turkish grievances, like Bulgaria and Hungary made it for security reasons, especially Bulgaria which as a neighbouring country can be the victim of greater migratory inflows.

Interestingly, other Mediterranean EU members are also hesitant to 'punish' Turkey. Italy, which had delimitation agreement with Greece, has close ties with the GNA as well; the ENI's main Libyan facilities are located in the GNA-controlled area thus the good relations with Ankara push Rome to have a more balanced foreign policy towards the regional actors.<sup>58</sup>

Turkish investments in Malta, in line with diplomatic efforts also bear fruits. The small Mediterranean island has a huge geopolitical importance; its proximity to the Libyan coast makes the country an excellent spot for (military) bases and transport routes. Turkish firms bought a harbour and during 2020 summer a number of negotiations were taking place.<sup>59</sup> Malta left IRINI, but it refrained from openly siding with Turkey.

Even if the EU remains indisposed to act in line with the Greek interests, the prospective change in the US foreign policy after Joe Biden's path to the White house would make Turkey's position even weaker in the Eastern Mediterranean. As it lost its main ally, Donald Trump in Washington, it could face harsher sanctions and even more severe actions to counter its ambitions.

While the world was watching the post-election developments in the US, Greece managed to broaden its security cooperation with Turkey's rivals. In mid-November, the Greek Defence Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos met his Israeli and Cypriot counterparts in Nicosia to hold security talks and they reached an agreement to enhance security cooperation.<sup>60</sup> The security collaboration has already manifested in early 2020 in a \$1.68 billion agreement to purchase training aircraft and establish a flight school operated by Elbit Systems.<sup>61</sup> Israeli drones were already deployed in the Aegean to worry Turkey.<sup>62</sup> Greece also strengthened its defence cooperation with France, after preliminary declaration, in December, the government announced that it would purchase of 18 Dassault-made Rafale fighter jets (six newly-built, twelve second-hand) and their equipment for 2.3 billion euros.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Yelda ONGUN: [Turkey in an Increasingly Complex Eastern Mediterranean: How Turkey can Defend its Interests and Alleviate its Isolation in the Region](#) [online] In: Michaël Tanchum: Eastern Mediterranean in uncharted waters: Perspectives on Emerging Geopolitical Realities. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung 2020. 31-38. [20.01.2021]

<sup>56</sup> Antonis KAMARAS: [Greece's call for an embargo on weapons sales to Turkey: a seminal step for the EU's collective defence identity?](#) [online] 20.11.2020. Source: ELIAMEP [20.01.2021.]

<sup>57</sup> [Merkel and Borissov blocked EU sanctions against Turkey at summit: sources.](#) [online] 11.12.2020. Source: Euractiv [20.01.2021.]

<sup>58</sup> Michaël TANCHUM: [The Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis: A Regional System Perspective on the Mediterranean's new Great Game.](#) [online] In: Michaël Tanchum: Eastern Mediterranean in uncharted waters: Perspectives on Emerging Geopolitical Realities. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung 2020. 7-17. [02.01.2021]

<sup>59</sup> [Can Malta's diplomacy tip balance in Libya toward Turkey?](#) [12.08.2020.] Source: Al-Monitor [20.01.2021.]

<sup>60</sup> [Israel, Greece and Cyprus agree to boost defense cooperation.](#) [online] 12.11.2020. Source: The Times of Israel [20.01.2021.]

<sup>61</sup> [Greece okays \\$1.68 billion defense deal with Israel.](#) [online] 5.01.2021. Source: Times of Israel [20.01.2021.]

<sup>62</sup> Alex KASSIDIARIS: [Turkey Goes Ballistic After Greece Announces Possible Drone Deployment in Aegean Sea.](#) [online] 31.12.2020. Source: Insideover [20.01.2021.]

<sup>63</sup> [Greece to pay 2.3 bln euros for 18 French Rafale fighter jets](#) [online] 17.12.2020. Source: Ekathimerini [20.01.2021.]

To increase its security, on 18 November, 2020 Mitsotakis signed a “strategic partnership” and an “agreement on joint foreign policy and defence cooperation” with the United Arab Emirates,<sup>64</sup> which according to some may lead to sizable weapon transfer from the UAE to Greece in the future.<sup>65</sup> To add, Cyprus also signed a defence agreement with the Gulf country on January 13, 2020 cementing the Emiratis’ involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean Great Game.<sup>66</sup> That was a clear message from the regional alliance’s grim determination to stand against the Turkish maritime moves, that a joint naval drill was organised between 30 November and 6 December with the participation of Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, France and the UAE.<sup>67</sup>

Recent signs to ease the tensions show that the Turkish leadership wants to prevent a (deeper) crisis and isolation. Erdoğan’s diplomatic gestures to mend fences with the US and the EU and revival of the ‘exploratory talks’ with Greece which were ended in 2016 can contribute to the de-escalation.<sup>68</sup> These efforts happen when the country had to face major Greek arms deals and fighter jet modernisation while it is kicked out from F-35-program which can result in a strategic military fallback<sup>69</sup>

Ankara also makes attempt to normalise ties with Israel. The news about sending a new ambassador to Israel after two years hiatus,<sup>70</sup> or the idea of a possible maritime delimitation agreement between the two countries at the expense of Cyprus<sup>71</sup> may hardly help Turkey’s position and will not end the dispute with Greece and Cyprus or break the institutionalising regional anti-Turkish bloc.

### Conclusion

The Turkish and Greek rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean led to growing tensions in 2020. Turkey’s maritime agreement with the Tripoli-based GNA in November 2019, and its survey activities in contested areas within the zone of the ‘Mavi Vatan’ irked Greece and other regional countries.

Even though the relations between Athens and Ankara have been antagonistic since the early 1950s, the current controversy surpassed the previous issues. The border disputes and Turkish gunboat diplomacy in the Mediterranean replicated in nature those of the Aegean, but this time in a greater area in a more complex security and political system. While previously the tensions usually remained at bilateral level, the involvement of Libya into the Turkish ambitions strengthened the cooperation among its adversaries, and created an anti-Turkey coalition constituting of almost all other countries in the region. The establishment of Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum with the exclusion of Ankara clearly demonstrated this dangerous turn. The energy and political cooperation between these countries has strong defensive dimension with military equipment agreements that gives impulse to an arms race in the region, which makes the situation alarming.

In a greater context, Greece and Cyprus were able to find supporters within the EU, such as France. The sanctions accepted in autumn 2020 pointed out that the community is ready to punish Turkey, if it does not withdraw its vessels and stop its activities in the contested areas.

Nevertheless, the glass can be half full for Ankara. The European Council did not adopt harsh sanctions, and Ankara can rely on some states within the EU that are ready to show more understanding towards its claims, due to various reasons. German position will be crucial for the future, too. As Angela Merkel will leave its office this year, probably there will not be any change in the next months, but later on, Berlin may accept a different tone with Turkey. The same is true for the United States where Erdoğan lost his main ally, Donald Trump after the presidential elections. The already imposed sanctions against Turkey predict sharper reactions from the Biden administration. This change happens when Turkey is vulnerable due to the deepening economic crisis stemming from COVID-19 pandemic, thus greater sanctions could cause greater harm. This threat might restrict Turkish activities, however, even though the possibility for

<sup>64</sup> [Greece, UAE sign political, defense agreements](#). [online] 18.11.2020. Source: Al-Monitor [20.01.2021.]

<sup>65</sup> [How significant is the Greece-UAE defence agreement?](#) [online] 28.11.2020. Source: Ahval News. [20.01.2021.]

<sup>66</sup> [UAE signs joint defense agreement with Cyprus](#). [online] 13.01.2020. Source: Al-Monitor [20.01.2021.]

<sup>67</sup> [5 countries join in military exercise](#) [online] 29.11.2020. Source: Ekathimerini [20.01.2021.]

<sup>68</sup> [Turkish charm offensive puts EU in tight spot](#) [online] 19.01.2021. Source: Politico [20.01.2021.]

<sup>69</sup> Can KASAPOĞLU: [Türk Hava Gücünün En Zor On Yılı: Hava Harp Trendleri, Tehdit Ortamı Analizi ve Türk Hava Kuvvetleri'nin 5. Nesil Geleceği](#) [online] 18.01.2021. Source: EDAM [20.01.2021.]

<sup>70</sup> [Turkey chooses pro-Erdogan ambassador to Israel in bid to normalize ties](#) [online] 09.12.2020. Source: Al-Monitor [20.01.2021.]

<sup>71</sup> Cihat YAYCI - Zeynep CEYHAN: [Israel is Turkey's Neighbor Across the Sea: Delimitation of the Maritime Jurisdiction Areas between Turkey and Israel](#) [online] Source: Turkeyscope Vol. 4, No. 8, November - December 2020 [20.01.2021.]



# Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies

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an armed conflict will remain low, Ankara's manoeuvre will hinder seismic surveys and consequent natural gas exploitations in large part of the Eastern Mediterranean which can end up in a maritime frozen conflict.



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