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**Research Report**

## Turkey, the EU and the Eastern Mediterranean crisis: Militaryization of foreign policy and power rivalry

SWP Comment, No. 62/2020

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

*Suggested Citation:* Adar, Sinem; Toygür, Ilke (2020) : Turkey, the EU and the Eastern Mediterranean crisis: Militaryization of foreign policy and power rivalry, SWP Comment, No. 62/2020, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2020C62>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256657>

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# SWP Comment

NO. 62 DECEMBER 2020

## Turkey, the EU and the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis

Militarization of Foreign Policy and Power Rivalry

*Sinem Adar and Ilke Toygür*

The Eastern Mediterranean crisis reflects two overlapping developments. On the one hand, it is a manifestation of Turkey's increasingly assertive posturing in the international arena. At the same time, it shows the intensity of the geopolitical competition between Turkey and its adversaries, such as Egypt and the UAE. The EU Member States' different levels and forms of engagement with Turkey obstruct a consensus on how to coherently respond to these developments. With accession negotiations stalled and discussions focused on areas of conflict rather than cooperation, EU-Turkey relations are mired in stalemate, while the militarization of foreign policy is becoming increasingly prevalent in the EU's southern neighbourhood.

On 12 October Turkey announced that the *Oruc Reis* – the research ship at the centre of a row with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus – would continue its operations off the southern coast of the Greek island of Kastellorizo. The announcement surprised many, not least because Ankara had withdrawn the *Oruc Reis* to the Turkish coast in September and both Greece and Turkey had expressed readiness to resume exploratory talks under the NATO umbrella. On 15 October German and French diplomats accused Turkey of “provoking” the European Union (EU) and noted that if Ankara did not resume the dialogue, it could face a tough response from the EU. That warning echoed the 1 October European Council (EUCO) conclusions on external relations.

Even though Ankara ordered the *Oruc Reis* back to port on 30 November, the Eastern Mediterranean crisis will remain a pressing issue for various reasons. The mounting tension in August showed that a military collision between the NATO allies Greece and Turkey is not a remote possibility. It also exposed Turkey's increasing international isolation. While Turkey's maritime boundary conflicts with Greece and Cyprus have overlapped with its power rivalry against Egypt and the UAE, in recent months they have rapidly turned into discord between Turkey and the EU. At the same time, the diverging interests of the Member States vis-à-vis Turkey have revealed the difficulties the EU faces in adopting a unified approach towards Ankara.

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## Turkey's Confrontational Foreign Policy

Since the 2016 failed coup, Turkish foreign policy-making has been driven primarily by the readiness to “pull [the country] up by its bootstraps”. This shift in Turkey’s security outlook is based on two premises. First, because of the lack of solidarity during the 2016 attempted coup and the US partnership with the PYG/YPD in northern Syria against ISIS, Ankara believes it can no longer fully trust its Western partners. Second, it regards the West as in terminal decline owing to the retreat of liberalism and the power vacuum created by the US withdrawal from its multilateral commitments under the Trump Presidency. These two premises have led to a significant shift from the soft-power policies of the early 2010s to an overtly confrontational foreign policy in the past two years on numerous fronts – from Syria to (most recently) Nagorno-Karabakh. Ankara rejects the regional status quo ante and wants to expand its sphere of influence from the Caucasus to the MENA region.

The deployment of Turkish warships to watch over drilling activities in Cyprus’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) was by no means an isolated incident, nor was the provocation of Greece through the signing in 2019 of an EEZ agreement with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), which rides roughshod over the Greek island of Crete’s maritime boundaries. The conflict between Turkey, Greece and Cyprus over EEZs began in the early 2000s and intensified with the discovery of natural gas reserves in the early 2010s. It is only recently, however, that Ankara’s approach began to switch from diplomatic objections at the UN to the deployment of military tactics. Turkish decision-makers see their country’s exclusion from the EastMed Gas Forum (EMGF) and the aligning of both its adversaries (such as the UAE and Egypt) and its Western partners with Greece and Cyprus as affirming the urgent need for self-reliance.

The ideological backbone of Ankara’s actions in the Eastern Mediterranean is the

“Blue Homeland” (*mavi vatan*) doctrine, according to which naval supremacy is necessary to thwart attempts by Greece and Cyprus to control the seas surrounding Turkey with the backing of the transatlantic alliance. At stake are Turkey’s right to maritime boundaries, its ownership of hydrocarbon resources and the status of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is recognized only by Turkey.

The doctrine combines the expression of Ankara’s traditional security concerns about Northern Cyprus with an emphasis on access to resources – a reflection of Turkey’s overwhelming energy dependency (its 2019 energy imports totalled some US\$41 billion). It has received widespread support – from both left- and right-leaning ultranationalists as well as President Erdogan and his aides. This alliance of political actors mirrors the reconfiguration within the state apparatus in the wake of the 2016 attempted coup.

## Regional Power Rivalry: Turkey versus Egypt and the UAE

Yet, the alliance is prone to disagreement. The architects of the “Blue Homeland” doctrine support not only continued military posturing against Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean but also a maritime agreement with Egypt and Israel as well as contacts with Bashar al-Assad. That stance is supported by the main opposition actors. But given that under the leadership of Mr Erdogan, the AKP supported (and continues to support) the Muslim Brotherhood during (and after) the Arab Spring, it would be difficult to achieve a rapprochement with Abd al-Fattah as-Sisi or Al-Assad.

Against this background of Turkish opposition to the regional status quo ante, Ankara’s confrontational foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean has contributed to turning the crisis into a regional problem. Cairo feels increasingly threatened by Ankara owing to its support of the Muslim Brotherhood, senior members of which are in exile in Istanbul; and the Turkish mili-

tary intervention in Libya in early 2020 – which changed the balance of power against General Haftar, whom Cairo supports – only intensified that feeling. Egypt also sees Turkish actions in the Eastern Mediterranean as a challenge to its efforts to become a regional hub for energy trade and the distribution of liquefied natural gas.

Cairo is not alone in regarding Turkish actions in the Eastern Mediterranean as a security threat. The UAE and Turkey support opposing actors in Syria and Libya. At the same time, the UAE considers the close relations between Turkey and Qatar – the former gave the latter diplomatic and military support during the so-called Qatar crisis in 2017 – to pose a challenge to its regional hegemonic aspirations.

Since early 2019 the combined impact of all these factors has been to turn the Eastern Mediterranean crisis into a perfect storm. The Mediterranean is now a multi-stage theatre for demonstrating military might and engaging in geopolitical competition. This is evidenced by developments ranging from the formation of the EMGF and the recent agreement on transforming the forum into a Cairo-based regional organization to the increasing military and diplomatic cooperation between Greece, Cyprus, France, Egypt and the UAE.

## Responses from within the EU

Turkey's confrontational foreign policy – which directly affects Greece and Cyprus but at the same time has been a source of irritation for other EU Member States – has intensified efforts within the EU to forge a common policy towards Turkey. While the Union has become party to the conflict with Greece and Cyprus, well-known differences between the Member States over their engagement with Turkey have come to the surface.

Take, for example, France. In line with both its quest for a more independent European foreign policy and its discomfort over the change of power in Libya to the GNA's advantage following the Turkish interven-

tion in early 2020, France supports Greece and Cyprus and advocates a confrontational approach. This stance has similarities with Turkey's, not least the emphasis on sovereignty, the display of military might and increased defence spending. Greece's purchase on 14 September of French weaponry and France's joint military exercises with Greece, Italy and Cyprus are cases in point. French President Emmanuel Macron sees the creation of *Pax Mediterranea* as providing new grounds for political cooperation over the Mediterranean and as crucial to halting Turkey's "imperial fantasies".

Southern European states such as Italy, Spain and Malta seem to seek a balance between *Pax Mediterranea* and Turkey. Italy, for example, has conducted separate military drills in the Eastern Mediterranean not only with Greece and France but also with Turkey. In pursuit of its goal of energy diversification and mindful of the need to protect its economic and security interests in Libya, Rome carefully seeks to balance adherence to the EU's internal solidarity principle and the maintenance of workable relations with Turkey. Meanwhile, both Spain and Malta expressed solidarity with Greece and Cyprus at the MED7 Corsica meeting in September. But at the same time they advocate a more reconciliatory approach to Turkey. Spanish banks, alongside French and Italian ones, are most exposed to Turkey's economic woes, while Turkey and Malta cooperate on migration.

Eastern European and Baltic states have their own strategic considerations, too. In general, a smooth relationship with Turkey – a long-standing NATO ally – is important since the alliance plays a crucial role in their national security. Some leaders have even established a personal friendship with President Erdogan.

Germany, which is home to Europe's largest Turkish diaspora and has strong economic ties with Turkey, is in favour of a dialogue-based approach to Ankara. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Berlin initiated mediation efforts between Turkey and Greece in August.

## EU-Turkey Relations: Between Confrontation and Rebuilding Trust

Member States tend to approach their relations with Turkey on the basis of their national interests and shape their stance at the EU level accordingly. It is imperative that the EU pursue a careful balancing act between confronting Turkish unilateralism and preventing bilateral tensions from determining policymaking at the EU level.

Owing to the current stalemate in EU-Turkey relations, reconciliation is difficult, if not impossible, at present. Since the 1 October EUCO conclusions, there have been several alarming developments, such as Mr. Erdogan's call for a boycott of French products during the spat with France over Islam; the decision to open Varosha, an abandoned southern quarter of the Cypriot city of Famagusta, which fell under Turkish control during the 1974 Cyprus invasion; and Mr Erdogan's recent call for a two-state solution in Cyprus. All this has only contributed to the existing stalemate.

Still, certain steps could be taken to prevent further deterioration. The EU should signal to Turkey that its claims in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly those over Kastellorizo and the distribution of energy resources, have been heard. At the same time, it should continue insisting that Turkey abide by international law. Reviving a discussion about areas of cooperation and their scope conditions could further help to improve the functioning of foreign policy.

The EU could also use various economic instruments to pressure Turkey, such as limiting IPA funds and Turkish participation in EU programmes or launching inquiries into disputable trade practices under the current Customs Union agreement. And while sanctions are always available as a tool, effectiveness would very much depend on scope.

Even though the official suspension of membership talks might appear an attractive option, it would not necessarily be in

the long-term interests of the EU. Given the decreasing vote share of the ruling AKP/MHP and the increasingly visible cracks within that alliance, the EU should keep membership talks as a normative instrument for the future – if and when Turkey begins to pursue democratic repair.

Besides instruments directly targeting Turkey, there is also the larger question of peace-building in the EU's southern neighbourhood, especially since the Eastern Mediterranean has become a playground for multiple proxy wars and a battlefield for reconfiguring the status quo in the MENA region. The militarization of foreign policy, though not unique to Turkey, seems to be both the catalyst and the consequence of this power rivalry. Decision-makers within the EU should take into account the regional dimension of the Eastern Mediterranean crisis when considering policies with which to confront Turkey. Given that defence capability is one of the prerequisites (albeit insufficient in itself) for the militarization of foreign policy, the EU could make more effective use of the instrument of arms embargo, including on dual-use materials. Sanctions against the defence industry is another instrument that the EU could consider. At the same time, Member States should exercise caution about deploying arms sales to other actors as a tactical tool to counterbalance Turkey.

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ISSN 1861-1761  
doi: 10.18449/2020C62

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The Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the German Federal Foreign Office.

SWP Comment 62  
December 2020

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