ANALYSIS

PEACE AND SECURITY

TURKEY AND THE MEDITERRANEAN IMBROGLIO

The story of an aspiring regional power

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Turkey's assertive and militarized foreign policy have reached their limits in the Eastern Mediterranean, and as of late 2020, Ankara is seeking ways to exit its self-imposed impasse.

The recent conflicts and crises in the region intensified anti-EU sentiments in Turkey, and the public has lost interest in the EU membership process. This may be good news for those in the EU who want to keep Turkey out of Europe, and for those in Turkey who want to keep the EU out of Turkey, but the EU cannot face losing Turkey, and the EU is too critical for Turkey to lose.

The prevalent sentiment in Turkey is that the EU is backing traditional foes of Turkey, which eventually plays into the hands of nationalist forces in the country.

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Executive summary

Turkey has traditionally viewed the Mediterranean through a security prism. In the past, Ankara took a cautious approach to European Union (EU) initiatives in the Mediterranean, and though it officially became part of them, it has kept a low-profile. This stems from the ineffectiveness of these initiatives as much as Turkey's concern they could distract attention from its full EU membership bid.

The (Eastern) Mediterranean has been a geographical entity for Turkey for a relatively short period, in which Ankara's concentrated efforts on threat perceptions and Cyprus played a critical and dominating role in devising its policies vis-a-vis the Eastern Mediterranean. What was lacking was a perspective of cooperation and the deepening of relations with the region and littoral countries. After the 1970s construction of the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, which continues to carry oil from northern Iraq to Turkey's Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, and with the construction of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, the region's strategic importance grew to new heights. Within this context, Turkey has attributed utmost strategic value to Cyprus, and considered its military presence in the northern part of the island as a strategic imperative – a security mindset that is even stronger today.

Turkey has been ruled by the (moderate) Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) government since 2002. The AKP government, in its nearly 20 years of incumbency which is the longest in this region, has been through three successive ideological phases. In its first stage, the AKP government followed a somewhat liberal policy both domestically and in its foreign policy. This represents the only time period Turkey sought partnership in the region in the 2000s. In its second phase, the AKP government, taking advantage of the Arab Spring, embarked upon an overly ambitious policy of making Turkey a regional power, dominating newly-elected Muslim Brotherhood parties in an area stretching from Tunisia to Syria. In this historical moment, Turkey under the AKP government, would become the leader of the Mediterranean basin. However, with the collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood governments and the ensuing civil wars in Libya and Syria, the AKP's plans to be a regional hegemon failed.

In its third phase, starting from 2015-16, the AKP government allied with nationalist forces domestically and adopted a more assertive foreign policy posture in the Mediterranean. Trying to break its isolation within the region, Turkey resorted to military means, engaging in three conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Libya, as well as confronting its NATO allies such as Greece and France in its standoff in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey also deployed a new maritime strategy dubbed the Blue Homeland doctrine, which envisages a more assertive policy to defend Turkey's maritime border claims. Turkey's second move was to engage militarily in the Libyan conflict and sign memorandums of understanding with the Fayez al-Sarraj government in Tripoli.

Turkey's moves put it at odds with the EU, the United States (US) and regional countries. In addition, for the first time in its history, Turkey faced a large bloc of countries such as Egypt, France, Greece, the Republic of Cyprus (ROC), Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Russia, the US and Saudi Arabia. Turkey, once a country that was negotiating membership and hailed as a model for the expansion of democratization in the broader Middle East and North Africa, faced the threat of sanctions from the EU, engaged in drone wars in Libya, and committed to topple the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria by instrumentalizing Islamist fighters.

Turkey's assertive and militarized foreign policy have reached their limits in the Eastern Mediterranean, and as of late 2020, Ankara is seeking ways to exit its self-imposed impasse.

The Eastern Mediterranean, like all borders and regions, is a politically and strategically constructed area. Each littoral nation has attributed different meanings, conceptions and perceptions to the region stemming from their cultures, histories and socio-political idiosyncrasies. The region has long been a gateway for international maritime trade connecting the Eurasian mass through the Suez Canal. It went through a period of turmoil caused by the Arab Spring, ensuing conflicts and instability, as well as the discovery of natural gas deposits a decade ago, which have further complicated regional power configurations. The Eastern Mediterranean has seen less unification efforts (ex. Egypt and Syria in the 1950s), and more conflicts between Arabs and Israel, the Turkish military intervention in Cyprus, the Lebanese civil war and Syrian intervention, the Palestine question, and recently the conflicts in Syria and Libya. From a geographical point of view while the EU, starting in the 1970s but especially since 1995, launched initiatives based on cooperation, its influence on the developments in the eastern part of the Mediterranean has been quite limited, and this region has seen growing conflict and instability. As the country with the longest coast in the Mediterranean, Turkey was influenced by the region's myriad of instabilities such as regional conflicts, migration flows, great power competition, and the scramble for energy resources.

Culturally and historically, Turkish society lacked a maritime outlook and focused its attention on land. Turkey has never conceived the Mediterranean as a region in itself, as a geographical entity. It was more of an extension of the Middle East, a sea that separates it from other nations. Even Turkey's fishing industry concentrated in the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea. Apart from the tourism industry boom that started in the 1990s, Turkey did not consider the region an area of economic opportunity and political cooperation for a long time. While Turkey led the initiative to launch the Black Sea Economic Cooperation in 1991, which evolved into a regional organization despite its limited success, it has never conceived of an economic, political, or cultural initiative that brought littoral states together on its southern shores. Turkey preferred to deal with regional countries on a bilateral level rather than developing a regional platform.

The AKP government, which came to power in late 2002, did not have a consistent foreign policy line, let alone a Mediterranean policy. Its long incumbency has gone through three phases in ideological terms, all of which impacted Turkey's foreign policy in different ways. In its first phase, starting from 2002 to 2011, the AKP, claiming it had stripped itself of Islamism, allied with the liberal forces in the country and portrayed itself as a liberal actor to transform the security-dominated Turkish state apparatus. In its second phase, during and immediately after the Arab Spring, the AKP government broke up with liberals and began to pursue an Islamist and expansionist agenda. In this Islamist phase, the AKP government tried to insert Turkey as the leader of the Muslim world, an ambitious policy that was doomed to fail. And in its third nationalist phase beginning in 2015-16, the AKP allied with nationalist forces domestically and reverted to the traditional security-oriented policy, which was reflected in the militarization of its foreign policy that included its approach to issues in the Mediterranean. This text will cover Turkey's approach and policy towards the Mediterranean and will examine the impact of the AKP's ideological transformation on its Mediterranean policy, its response to the challenges emanating from the regional reconfigurations.

In general, geopolitical thinking and securitization have dominated the Turkish state's approach to the Mediterranean, and apart from a short period in the 2000s, the AKP government continued with this tradition. The Mediterranean has been a hard security concern for Turkey, and the EU's threat perceptions rather than cooperation initiatives determined Ankara's policy vis-a-vis the region.

CYPRUS: TURKEY'S MEDITERRANEAN KNOT

Since the mid-1960s, the Cyprus question has been among the main national issues for the Turkish public, and it has been the primary strategic preoccupation for successive Turkish governments. It was the republic's first cross-border military operation, which was carried out by a center left-Islamist coalition in 1974.[1] Until the rise of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the mid-1980s, which posed a direct military threat to Turkey's territorial integrity, the Cyprus issue dominated the nation's foreign policy agenda and predominantly shaped Turkey's approach and perception of Mediterranean policy.

The strategic thinking developed in the 1950s was to deny the control of Turkey's west and southern coast by the same hostile power, meaning Greece. Back in the 1950s, Greece was entertaining the idea of unification with Cyprus (also known as enosis), and Turkey was concerned it would be strategically vulnerable, especially in times of crises, and that its civilian, commercial, and military transportation would be in danger if Greece and/or Greek Cypriots took control of Cyprus. Turkey's perception that Greece was trying to envelop Turkey from the island of Lemnos opposite the Dardanelles strait all the way to the Bay of Iskenderun resurfaced in the late 2010s.

While the security and well-being of the Turkish Cypriots were important, and Turkey relies on the Treaty Guarantee of 1960 for its decision, Turkey's primary motive to take action in 1974 was to secure its long southern shores.

Turkey's resulting military and political control of the island's northern part pushed Turkey on the defensive side, sucking Turkey's diplomatic energy to defend and justify its military action, and made Turkey's outlook more insular, more security focused. Dedicated to protecting its territorial gains on the island at any cost, which included a US arms embargo between 1974-77, various United Nations (UN) Security Council reso-

1 Turkey's military intervention is defined as an occupation by Greece, Greek Cypriots, and the wider international society, and it is labeled as "Cyprus Peace Operation" in official Turkish parlance.

lutions calling for the withdrawal of foreign troops, growing tensions with Greece and the deterioration of relations with developing countries, the Cyprus issue took Turkish foreign policy hostage for many years. During its liberal phase, the AKP government, facing stiff backlash and defying nationalist circles' resistance, accepted the Annan Plan for Cyprus, which was put voted upon in a 2004 referendum. However, the plan was rejected by the Greek Cypriots by a large margin. Despite the rejection of the plan, the EU offered full membership to the Republic of Cyprus (ROC) as representing the whole island.

The Cyprus issue has left a strong imprint on Turkey's perception of the Mediterranean. Both Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) felt betrayed by the EU, and the Greek Cypriots have gained powerful leverage on the negotiation table as well as influence over the EU's approach to Turkey and the Cyprus issue.

TURKEY'S PERCEPTION OF THE EU MEDITERRANEAN POLICY

Turkey has naturally paid attention to EU policies and approaches in the Mediterranean since its inception. It became part of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Process that started in 1995 and has been a member of the Union for the Mediterranean since its foundation in 2008. However, especially the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) which was initiated by France under former President Nicolas Sarkozy, who vehemently opposed Turkey's EU membership, posed a dilemma for Turkey. It was not possible for Turkey to avoid participating in this platform, but Ankara was cautious because membership in the UfM might have become a hindrance on Turkey's EU membership bid. Turkey was not satisfied with alternatives to full membership and was concerned such initiatives might pose distractions to the usual membership process. Therefore, Turkey preferred to keep a low profile in Euro-Mediterranean affairs.[2] In due course, Turkey has been more enthusiastic in embracing the US-based Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative launched in 2004, and actively participated in various democratization efforts although Turkey refrained labelling itself as a model country.

GREECE AND ARABS vs. TURKEY AND ISRAEL

After Turkey gained strategic supremacy through its control of the northern part of Cyprus, and the Turkish Parliament declared that if Greece enlarged offshore territorial waters in the Aegean from 6 miles to 12 miles, it would consider such an action as *casus belli*, Athens sought new partners to balance Turkey's actions, especially after the TRNC was established in 1983. It is understandable that Greece signed a military alliance and developed a doctrine of collective defense with the Republic of Cyprus in 1995, but it also forged military ties with Syria and Armenia in 1995. Additionally, Greek governments established informal ties with the PKK, the Kurdish separatist organization which led an uprising in the southeastern part of Turkey that led to the deaths of 45,000 people. Its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was issued a Greek Cypriot passport and Athens was one of his transfer destinations after Turkey threatened Syria to expel him. Öcalan ended up in the Greek embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, where Turkish intelligence officers detained him and brought him before the justice system in Turkey. Greece's ties with Syria also led to fears that Turkey was encircled. A prominent Turkish diplomat developed the idea that Turkey was facing a "Two and a Half War" in which Turkey's engagement in war with Syria would be followed by engagement with Greece and the PKK, and that Turkey would have to take precautions to prevent such a contingency.[3]

Turkey's counter move was to strengthen its security ties with Israel, culminating in the signing of a military education agreement in 1996. The two nations intensified their cooperation through the modernization of military equipment, including fighter jets, and organized joint military exercises. This precarious balance remained in place until 2009 when then-Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made controversial statements during a meeting with Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos, which led to the deterioration of Turkey-Israel relations. The disruption of this balance in the Eastern Mediterranean would have severe consequences for Turkey in the 2010s.

ZERO PROBLEMS WITH NEIGHBORS

In the initial stages of its power, which were marked by its tactical alliance with liberal groups in Turkish society, the AKP pursued a policy called "Zero Problems with Neighbors". Turkey would move from a Hobbesian to a Kantian mentality in the making of its foreign policy, from security-dominated to a problem-solving understanding, and from hard power to soft power. Supported by liberals domestically and the US and the EU externally, this liberal discourse adopted by Islamists in foreign policy had been a noteworthy change in Turkish foreign policy. As stated above, the first sign of this new policy came with the radical change in Turkey's Cyprus policy with the acceptance of the Annan Plan. The AKP government capitalized on already fixed relations with Greece by the previous government, and it made a breakthrough in Turkish-EU relations, starting the negotiation process in 2004-2005, despite disappointments towards the EU in its handling of the Cyprus issue.

Moreover, the AKP government intensified its efforts to deep-

2 Albars Görgülü and Gülşah Dark, Turkey, the EU and the Mediterranean: Perceptions, Policies and Prospects, Med Reset Working Papers, 2 June 2017 https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Turkey-%2C-the-EU-and-the-Mediterranean-%3A-Perceptions-G%C3%B6rg%C3%BCl%C3%BC-Dark/fc188953e581fa77d39d28ee4e5d3f5d453f4f03

3 Şükrü Elekdağ, "Two and one-half war strategy," Perceptions, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1996) https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/817262.

en Turkey's ties with the Middle East and the Arab world. A Turkish citizen became the Secretary-General of the Islamic Cooperation Organization. Turkey's image as a country ruled by an Islamist government, yet maintaining its secular characteristics, and seeking membership in the EU was appealing for new generations in the Middle East. The AKP government placed special emphasis on Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. Turkey both economically and politically developed a special relationship with the Assad regime, including lifting visa requirements, convening joint cabinet meetings, and deepening trade, tourism, and investment relations, which culminated in a free trade agreement that was extended to include Lebanon and Jordan. Turkey also enlarged its harbor in Iskenderun on the Mediterranean coast to expand its trade with the regional countries.

THE ARAB SPRING, THE ISLAMIST MOMENT AND AN EPIC FALL OF A DREAM

The Arab Spring, the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood governments, revived Turkish Islamists' century-old dream to lead former Ottoman territories through more robust ties with the various Muslim Brotherhood leaders in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, the Gaza Strip and eventually in Syria. Turkey, under the Islamist AKP rule, would sit at the top of this (moderate) Islamist belt around the Mediterranean and would emerge as the regional hegemon. Erdoğan held public rallies in Egypt and Libya. Turkish officials and AKP affiliated figures offered advice to Islamist governments that did not have experience in power. The AKP was bold enough to invite those prominent leaders such as Rached Ghannouchi from Tunisia, Mohamed Morsi from Egypt, and Khaled Mashal from Gaza to attend AKP party conventions, thus signifying the ideological reach of Turkish Islamists.

With the collapse of the Ennahda government in Tunisia, the overthrow of the Morsi government through a military coup in Egypt, and the civil wars in Libya and Syria, the AKP government's plans to insert itself as a regional power and Erdoğan himself as a regional leader were abruptly terminated. Turkish Islamists' euphoria of dominating the region, relying on other Islamist actors and creating an Islamist belt in the Eastern Mediterranean failed, leaving many adverse effects both for Turkey and regional states.

The Erdoğan government committed itself to oust the Assad regime and to replace it with the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood at any cost. By forming the Syrian National Army as the military wing of the Syrian National Council, Turkey fostered an organization of radical Islamist fighters from all over the world to fight against Assad forces. This was a first-time event in republican history in which Turkey openly pursued regime change through the use of radical Islamist elements in a neighboring country. The result was the deterioration of the conflict inside Syria, with more than four million Syrians taking refuge in Turkey, and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the PKK, taking control of the bordering regions in the Afrin area near Hatay and east of the Euphrates river, a nightmare scenario for Turkey. Realizing that it was beyond Turkey's capacity to overthrow the Assad regime, especially after Russia's intervention in September 2015, Turkey had to reformulate its Syria policy and redirected its attention to the Kurdish issue, which led to three successive military operations in Syria using Islamist Syrian National Army fighters as proxies.

The Erdoğan government's overly ambitious drive to restore a regional order based on Islamists in the Mediterranean belt has been the biggest failure the country has encountered since its establishment, and it marked the beginning of the militarization of Turkish foreign policy.

THE DISRUPTION OF THE MEDITERRANEAN BALANCE

Besides the Syrian fiasco, Turkey's relations with Israel deteriorated after the Davos meeting in 2009 and the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010. With the ousting of Morsi from power in Egypt, Turkey withdrew its ambassador from the country and allowed former members of the Muslim Brotherhood to find shelter in Turkey. The AKP government used harsh language toward Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the leader of the coup and then president of the country, which dealt a severe blow to bilateral relations.

Coming from an Islamist tradition and raised in an anti-Jewish environment, it was a radical change for Erdoğan and his party to continue cordial relations with Israel when the AKP came to power. Nevertheless, in the first, liberal phase of the AKP incumbency, Erdoğan was awarded a medal by the Jewish lobbying group JINSA, and he would visit Tel Aviv, meet with former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, and Turkish-Israeli military cooperation continued in full-swing. However, from 2009 on, relations with Israel went from bad to worse, and Erdoğan, aspiring to be a regional leader, found it convenient to reprimand Israel publicly. Although Israel apologized for its raid on the Turkish Mavi Marmara vessel, which was part of a flotilla carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza, resulting in the deaths of 10 Turkish citizens, relations remained frozen. Realizing that relations with Turkey were unstable, unpredictable and Turkey was no longer a reliable partner in the region, Israel was quick to change its axis, and replaced Ankara with Athens while also developing its ties with the ROC. Only three months after the Mavi Marmara affair, in August 2010, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Athens. From that point on, diplomatic ties developed, security and military cooperation increased, as well as cooperation in other fields, including the strengthening of economic and energy relations. Visits by defense ministers became frequent, with Greece and Israel eventually signing a military cooperation agreement in January 2012 and holding joint military exercises. Starting in 2015, close bilateral ties between Greece and Israel extended to include the ROC, and the three countries came together in Nicosia to declare their cooperation, especially in the area

of energy, agreeing to hold regular annual meetings. In November 2017, this cooperation took a military dimension, and that same year Israel participated in a military exercise with the ROC.

When Egypt joined Greece and ROC to hold a tripartite meeting in Cairo in November 2014, which also turned into regularly held annual meetings, the geopolitical landscape began to turn towards Turkey's disadvantage. Greece plays a central role in those trilateral meetings, the 3+1 platforms, between Israel-ROC-Greece and between Egypt-ROC-Greece.

What was more important was the tilting of US weight towards Greece and the ROC, which until the 2010s preferred to remain neutral in the Turkish-Greek disputes and the Cyprus issue. The US became part of the Noble Dina military exercises, which have been held annually since 2012, together with Greece and Israel. In 2019, Cyprus also joined the exercise.[4] Washington signed a new security cooperation agreement with Athens in October 2019, allowing it to modernize its military facility in Greece, including its base in Souda on the island of Crete.

The US Congress' decision in September 2019 to lift a 1987 arms embargo imposed on the ROC, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement that the US is deepening security cooperation with the ROC was another turning point in the course of the regional power reconfiguration and came as a shock to the Turkish government.[5] This new strategic architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean left Turkey isolated and marginalized in the areas of diplomacy, energy, and security. Furthermore, this was a self-imposed isolation since Turkey broke its relations with Greece, Syria, Israel, Egypt, the Libyan National Council in Tobruk, all at the same time. Turkey's only allies in this region were Qatar, Hamas, and the Government of National Accord in Tripoli. The last two actors were weak and needed Turkey's support, while Qatar has no border with the Mediterranean, though its support is critical on the intelligence and financial fronts.

As tensions grew in the region and with Turkey's increasing involvement in Libya, Ankara's relations with France also soured. France supported the warlord Khalifa Haftar in the Libyan civil war, while Turkey supported the UN-recognized legitimate Sarraj government. Erdoğan and French President Emmanuel Macron engaged in a mutual spat, accusing each other of destabilizing the region. Moreover, France, which historically considers itself "a Mediterranean power," engaged in competition with Turkey in the Mediterranean, North Africa, and partially in the Sahel region, where Turkey is trying to expand as part of its African policy. During the crisis between Turkey and Greece, France openly sided with Greece and the ROC, and Macron declared that Greece and France are pursuing a new framework of strategic defense. To make matters worse for Turkey, Macron sent two navy vessels for military exercises with Greece, and sent jets to the ROC, a move denounced strongly by Ankara. Meanwhile, at the height of the tensions between Turkey on one side and Greece, France, and Egypt on the other, the United Arab Emirates which oppose the Muslim Brotherhood sent F-16 jets to support Greece, and they also took part in military drills in August 2020.

Though he had developed a level of understanding with Erdoğan, Russian President Vladimir Putin avoided lending his support to Erdoğan and did not get directly involved in the maritime disputes in the region. As expected, the EU announced it would back its members, Greece and the ROC, in maritime disputes with Turkey, though Germany, which assumed the presidency of the EU Council, took a somewhat neutral approach, partly restrained France and Greece, and tried to play an honest broker role.

The formation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in January 2019 was another milestone in the course of regional developments. Egypt, the ROC, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority signed the foundation charter in Cairo. France showed its interest to take part in it, and the Forum was supported by the US, which was trying to bring its allies together in the region. Later in September 2020, the Forum officially turned into a regional organization with ambitious plans to make Egypt a regional energy center.[6] It was also surprising for Ankara to see the Palestinian Authority participate in the Forum.

The delicate balance established in the Eastern Mediterranean over many years, in which Turkey had close military ties with Israel, and Greece had better relations with many Arab countries has been upended to Turkey's disadvantage in the last decade. Both Greece and the ROC were shrewd enough to take advantage of Turkey's misjudgments, short-sightedness, and occasionally its overconfidence in handling regional issues. By applying the principles of Realpolitik, they energetically worked to form an anti-Turkey coalition in the region. As it turns out, this is the most striking strategic loneliness Turkey has experienced in any region and any dispute throughout its modern history.

The problem is that countries such as Egypt, Greece, the ROC, France, and the UAE denounced Turkey for what they call illegal activities in May 2020.[7] In the Arab League ministerial committee meeting, Egypt's foreign minister described Turkey's military involvement in Libya, Syria, and Iraq as a threat

4 Military Cooperation between Israel, Greece, Cyprus, https://euro-sd.com/2020/03/allgemein/16506/military-cooperation-between-israel-greece-and-cyprus/

5 US lifting of the arms embargo on Cyprus 'the right thing to do,' Pompeo says https://www.duvarenglish.com/diplomacy/2020/09/03/us-lifting-of-arms-embargo-on-cyprus-the-right-thing-to-do-pompeo-says/

6 East Med Gaz Forum turns into a regional organisation, in blow to Turkey, 23 September 2020 https://thearabweekly.com/east-med-gas-forum-turns-regional-organisation-blow-turkey

7 http://cimsec.org/turkeys-mavi-vatan-strategy-and-rising-insecurity-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/45544

to regional security and stability.[8] For the first time in Turkey's foreign policy history, actors as diverse as the US, the EU, Greece, Israel, Egypt, France, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and global energy companies such as ExxonMobil, Eni, and Total all united to oppose Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey's response to this broader block in the region was to take a more assertive stance, and instead of pursuing a reconciliatory attitude, the AKP government has initially implemented coercive measures.

TURKEY'S RESPONSE: THE BLUE HOMELAND AND FORWARD DEFENSE DOCTRINES

Since a coup attempt in July 2016, and due to its declining public support, the AKP found it necessary to ally itself with nationalist and Eurasianist forces in domestic politics. This ideologically Islamist-nationalist coalition reflecting the two most powerful ideological currents in Turkey's history began to dominate Turkish foreign policy, which led to an unprecedented militarization of Turkish foreign policy.

Turkey has simultaneously engaged in three military operations in three countries, one of which is 2,000 km away from the nation. While the AKP's first attempt at re-asserting Turkey's influence in its wider region through soft power means failed, in this new nationalist phase, the new Islamist-nationalist coalition would try to project Turkey's power in its neighborhood through military means.

Amid such developments, the Blue Homeland doctrine resurfaced. The doctrine was devised by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz in 2006, while he was head of the Turkish navy's plan and policy operations, with the aim of bolstering Turkey's resilience at sea and to protect the country's maritime rights. The AKP government adopted this doctrine as a guiding principle, and after 2016, Islamist and nationalist currents merged into a new synergy to form the backbone of a more assertive and militarized foreign policy posture. Turkey completed its largest naval exercise in February 2019 with 103 vessels. Erdoğan and the Commander of the Navy had their photo taken in front of a "Blue Homeland" map, sending a symbolic and disturbing message, especially to Greece. The secular nationalists realized that allying with Erdoğan would bring crucial advantages, such as using radical Islamists as proxies in both Syria and Libya, and forging military ties with Qatar and Somalia, leading them to urge Erdoğan to be more assertive in defending maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The idea behind the Blue Homeland doctrine is reminiscent of the previous threat perception in Ankara that the Western world and Turkey have an antagonistic relationship, and that Western countries are trying to undermine Turkey's power, and there is an ongoing power struggle between Turkey and the Western powers. Along these sentiments, the West is thought to use proxies such as the PYD in Syria, Greece, and the ROC in the Mediterranean. Therefore, the doctrine proposes an assertive strategy to defend Turkey's rights. Secondly, the Blue Homeland doctrine argues that Turkey has neglected its maritime dimension and a new awareness is necessary both publicly and at the governmental level. Thirdly, Turkey's maritime rights are under threat and Western countries, "the Atlantic system" are trying to impose a new "Sévres Treaty" to encircle Turkey in the Mediterranean and are trying to strangle Turkey in a narrow sea area around Antalya bay on the nation's southern coast, and they are trying to establish a Kurdish state in Syria with an outlet to the Mediterranean. Fourth, the proponents of the Blue Homeland doctrine consider Cyprus as a vitally important island for Turkey's geopolitical needs and reject any federal or confederal solution efforts to the Cyprus issue. They propose that Turkey should establish naval bases in the TRNC. The sea area that Blue Homeland claims is 462 square kilometers surrounding Turkey, which is more than half of Turkey's mainland, and it should be protected by using naval power if, and when, necessary.

The Blue Homeland doctrine merges the Sévres syndrome[9] in mainland Anatolia and at sea, thus adding a sea dimension to the traditional anti-western position. Both Cem Gürdeniz and Cihat Yaycı, retired admirals who rose to prominence in defending the Blue Homeland doctrine, argued a map prepared by the Seville University delineates the maritime borders of the EU to Turkey's disadvantage. Although this is by no means an official document of the EU, and the EU Commission declared that third party documents are not binding, the AKP government preferred to take it seriously, with both Erdoğan and the minister of foreign affairs referring to this map as an EU document. They claimed it was a new version of the Sévres Treaty and that they would tear it up as Turkey had done before. The use of the document for domestic consumption was evident here but its material existence and its acceptance by the government as a valid document made it a big fuss among the Turkish public. Realizing the growing unease with the map, the US embassy in Ankara issued a statement that the US did not consider the Seville map to be a legally binding document.[10] The map itself seems to be a working document which was prepared by Professor Juan Luis Suarez de Vivero and Juan Carlos Mateos at Seville University, but it entitles exclusive economic zones not only to the islands of Crete and Rhodes, but also to the tiny island of Kastellorizo (Megisti in Greek and Meis in Turkish), which is two kilometers off the coast of Kaş with only 500 inhabitants, and is 580 kilometers away from mainland Greece. Although Greece does not refer to the map itself, it claims Kastellorizo should be entitled to

8 https://www.arabnews.com/node/1733101/middle-east

9 The Sévres Treaty was signed by the Ottoman government in August 1920 which envisaged the partition of the remaining Ottoman territory.

10 https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/seville-map-has-no-legal-significance-says-us-embassy-in-ankara-158468

about 40,000 sq km of sea rights, which obviously overlap the area that Turkey naturally considers its own continental shelf. The alleged map also connects the sea zones of Crete, Rhodes and Kastellorizo with the proposed sea zone of Cyprus, thus leaving Turkey with a minimal sea area. In fact, this has long been a frightening scenario for the Turkish state. If implemented as is, the map provides a great advantage to Greece and the ROC in terms of sea rights. Despite the EU's statement that it's not a binding document, experts and retired admirals maintain the EU uses this map in various works, such as satellite imaging and meteorological assessments.

TURKEY'S ATTEMPT AT BREAKING ITS ISOLATION I: LIBYA

Turkey's strategic culture has long held the notion that for the defense of the Turkish mainland, Turkey should have a strong army and a cross-border military presence.

The Blue Homeland doctrine shares this traditional line of strategic thinking and extends it to the sea areas. In what may be called a "forward defense doctrine," which the Blue Homeland constitutes in a maritime dimension, Turkey currently maintains troops in 12 countries, actively engaged in three conflicts, and heavily uses its navy in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Both nationalist and Islamist outlooks converged in reaching out to Libya as a way to break Turkey's marginalization and to "tear the Seville Map" as the government put it. The nationalists argued it was imperative to engage in Libya militarily and to delineate areas of maritime jurisdiction, and it was important for the Erdoğan government to support the only Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government in the Mediterranean. The Turkish move came in December 2019 with the signing of the two Memorandums of Understanding, which the government presented as a historic victory against the West, and evidence that Turkey had become a gamechanger in the region. The government argued the agreement broke Turkey's isolation and disrupted a possible pipeline that could carry regional natural gas to Europe. Since the area of delimitation does not take into account the exclusive economic zones of the islands of Crete and Rhodes, the Greek government protested the MoU, and declared the Libyan ambassador persona non grata. The EU, the US, Israel and Egypt criticized the agreement on both legal and political terms.

On the political and military fronts, in April 2019, the Libyan National Army led by General Haftar launched an offensive, and the capital Tripoli came under siege. Turkey's military assistance was deployed at a critical juncture in which Tripoli was about to fall. Turkey sent military advisors to provide tactical assistance, as well as armed drones produced in Turkey and a naval presence off Libya's coast. Turkey's most controversial move was its decision to transfer Islamist fighters from Syria. There had been speculation regarding the transfer of Islamist fighters from Libya to Syria at the beginning of the conflict in Syria, but with Turkey's intervention in Libya, the direction of the transfer reversed.[11] There are conflicting numbers claimed by the international media, but Turkey's military involvement through a combination of technical expertise, Islamist mercenaries and armed drone capabilities played a decisive role in changing the military landscape on the ground. Turkish drones, such as the Bayraktar TB2, fought against the UAE operated Wing Loong II drones produced by the Chinese, which became the first large-scale drone war in the world.[12]

From a military perspective, Turkey's intervention in this proxy war seems to be successful on the Libyan front. GNA forces defeated Haftar-backed militias and took control of the strategic al-Watiya airport by pushing back Haftar forces, and also regained control of the areas up to Sirte, a critically important region from where Libya exports most of its oil.

Although Turkey faced a larger international coalition, including Egypt, France, Russia, and the UAE in Libya, its military involvement turned the tide in the Libyan civil war mostly because the other countries did not want to get involved militarily. However, despite Turkey's insistence, the much-expected Sirte-Jufra operation never materialized, and instead, the Sarraj government declared a cease-fire in August 2020.

Turkey's military intervention in Libya had several goals. The first was to keep the Sarraj government in power, as it had ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey especially had closer ties with Fethi Bashaga, the interior minister. This aim was achieved only temporarily since Sarraj declared he would resign at the end of October 2020, a decision with which Erdoğan did not hide his dissatisfaction. Although Sarraj rescinded his decision, the two factions of the conflict agreed on a ceasefire and convened in Tunisia to form a unity government. If such a unity government would succeed, it would not be possible for Turkey to have its previous influence on the new government. Second, Turkey was isolated in the region, and the Sarraj government's staying in power was necessary. Third, the MoU signed between Turkey and Libya, though registered with the UN and valid after a change of governments according to international law, was rejected by the House of Representatives in eastern Libya, a body which did not approve it. Fourth, Turkey was seeking a permanent military and naval base in Libya, in line with its forward defense and Blue Homeland doctrine, and the maintenance of a pro-Turkey government was essential for this purpose. Fifth, there is also an economic side as Turkey intended to take part in reconstruction efforts while seeking oil drilling concessions.

In sum, although militarily successful to date, Turkey's military undertaking in Libya carries critical risks and costs. It was the

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11 "Pentagon Report: Turkey sent up to 3,800 fighters to Libya," https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/pentagon-report-turkey-sent-up-to-3800-fighters-to-libya/2020/07/17/0736c972-c86d-11ea-a825-8722004e4150_story.html

12 "Libyan War Claimed 25 Large military drones in 2020," https://www.defenseworld.net/news/27332/Libyan_War_Claimed_25_Large_military_Drones_in_2020#.X3q4ZpMzYkg

first overseas operation with such a distance from mainland Turkey, and from a military point of view, it might be problematic to procure necessary equipment in the case of a counterattack on the limited number of Turkish military positions. After the recapture of land by Turkey-backed Sarraj forces on July 5, the al-Watiya airbase was attacked by unidentified fighter jets, but no casualties were reported. Turkey faces a coalition of countries in Libya, and its military engagement led to its further isolation in the region. Turkey's instrumentalization of Islamist fighters in proxy wars, though beneficial in the short term, deteriorated its international image.

TURKEY'S ATTEMPT AT BREAKING ITS ISOLATION II: THE EASTERN MEDITERRRANEAN

One of the widespread criticisms the AKP government has faced domestically is it did not pay enough attention to Eastern Mediterranean developments in the 2000s. While the ROC signed exclusive economic zone agreements with Egypt in 2003, with Lebanon in 2007, and with Israel in 2010, the AKP government focused on internal restructuring, and it was busy developing close ties with regional countries, and in order to entrench its problem-solving image, its reaction was relatively mild. During this first phase of the AKP government, nationalist forces were under pressure and the EU Harmonization Packages were implemented, which curbed the military's institutional power over civilian politics. Turkey confined its reaction by sending a letter to the UN in 2004, stating it has legitimate rights in those waters. Ankara's only delimitation agreement was signed with the TRNC in 2011, and Turkey sent a letter that delineated its continental shelf in the Eastern Mediterranean as late as March 18, 2019. Then, Turkey's last move came with a MoU signed with Libya. Those actions were found insufficient by domestic actors and the AKP government was heavily criticized for not declaring a unilateral exclusive economic zone along its Mediterranean shores.

The AKP government was also criticized domestically for being a latecomer to energy geopolitics in the region. As is known, the first natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean were made around 2009-2010 off the coast of Israel. Acquiring four seismic and drill ships after 2017 and naming them after Ottoman sultans and captains, Turkey began to use them for prospecting and drilling activities after 2018. This was the first attempt by Turkey to be a player in the regional energy game. Contrary to other countries, Turkey preferred not to cooperate with global energy companies, and tried to rely on TPAO, its own state-owned company, for seismic and drilling activities. The problem with these seismic surveys and drilling activities is Turkey carrying some of them out in areas where both the ROC and Greece claim exclusive economic zones. Even the sea areas where Turkey and TRNC awarded licenses overlapped with the blocks the ROC and Greece delineated for drilling purposes and awarded to energy companies like Eni and ExxonMobil. While the ROC issued arrest warrants for the crewmembers of the Turkish drillship, claiming they were operating in its exclusive economic zone, the EU imposed a travel ban and asset freezing for the captains of the Turkish drillship.

Turkey's second move was to seek disruption and block some exploration activities in disputed areas. In one of the most notable cases, Turkish navy vessels blocked an Italian drillship contracted by Eni headed for exploration in a ROC licensed area. Eni had to terminate its search in this area.

Unlike other actors, Turkey, which is in an isolated position, and with limited diplomatic options in its hand, had to use its naval power aggressively in the region in order to impose its Blue Homeland doctrine and deter a broader coalition of countries that it confronts. Ankara also resorted to another unusual instrument, issuing Navtex (navigational telex) for both its search activities and navy exercises, a warning typically issued for sailors regarding possible risks in a specific sea zone at a certain time, but Turkey turned it into an instrument for maintaining its position.

Turkey's bold moves and assertive style in the Mediterranean have solidified the coalition of countries opposing Ankara's actions. While the EU pledged full solidarity with the ROC, criticizing Turkey and stating its actions create grave concerns in the region, both France and the US openly backed Greece and the ROC. Tensions flared when France sent two frigates, one of which collided with a Turkish vessel and, in another instance a Greek frigate collided with a Turkish frigate accompanying the seismic search vessel Oruç Reis, causing a crisis within NATO which institutionally maintains a balanced attitude between its members.

To counter-attack Turkey's moves, Greece began to apply similar methods in the region. It held joint military exercises, Athens also issued navtex warnings and, most importantly, signed an agreement with Egypt in August 2020 for the delimitation of an exclusive economic zone that overlapped with the area of Turkey's MoU with Libya, further complicating the issue. Both sides declared the other agreement as null and void and challenged each other's legal status.

Turkey's dilemma was that all the countries it confronts in the Mediterranean are either members of NATO, the EU or the US allies. Therefore, its heavy-handed militarization in the Eastern Mediterranean poses structural restraints. Unlike using force against sub-state actors such as the PKK in Iraq, PYD, or Islamic State in Syria and Haftar forces in Libya, both Turkey and related countries are aware the use of force is out of question although minor incidents are possible. This fact has drawn the contours of Turkey's militarization in the Eastern Mediterranean.

At the height of tensions, two institutions, the EU and NATO, intervened to halt further escalation. The crisis coincided with Germany's presidency of the EU Council and, especially German Chancellor Angela Merkel and foreign minister Heiko Maas, actively mediated between the parties. The EU is the biggest trade partner and the biggest investor in the Turkish economy, which poses another limit to Turkey's room to maneuver. The EU publicly sided with its members in the disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean and pursued a carrot and stick policy towards Turkey. Under the pressure of sanctions from

the EU, the Erdoğan government pulled back the Oruç Reis seismic survey vessel on 12 September 2020 before its stated search period had ended. Erdoğan stated Turkey wanted to give diplomacy a chance and was ready to start negotiations with Greece without preconditions. The EU Council convened on 1-2 October 2020, and instead of imposing sanctions, the Council issued a warning for Turkey but also opened the way for a "positive political Turkey-EU agenda."[13] Consequently, Turkey and Greece agreed to restart "exploratory negotiations" halted after 60 rounds in 2016. The situation was trickier for NATO since all actors involved in recent tensions, Turkey, Greece, and France, were members. NATO was concerned the tensions, though short of military conflict, were weakening its posture in the Eastern Mediterranean, and disagreements distracted its attention from more serious crises. NATO also provided a viable platform for back-channel diplomacy where Turkish and Greek officials could meet. With the efforts of its Secretary-General, NATO convinced Turkey and Greece to start de-conflicting negotiations within NATO. Meanwhile, Turkey sent its Oruç Reis seismic vessel for exploration again in November 2020 but it was careful not to enter the maritime border delineated between Greece and Egypt.

Despite the verbal spat between Erdoğan and Macron, Turkey stated its intention to purchase the Samp-T missile system from France, easing the tensions between the two countries at least in the Mediterranean.[14]

CONCLUSION

For the last five years, Turkey has had an exhausting domestic and foreign policy agenda. Never before in Turkish history has the country been party to so many disputes in its surrounding region, and actively engaged in some of the conflicts. Engagement and involvement in so many issues and problems are not sustainable even for a country that has enormously increased its military capacity in recent years.

The current situation in the Mediterranean basin represents a diplomatic impasse for Turkey, but there is still some room for Ankara to redress the disrupted balance of power in the region. Israel maintains its intentions for economic cooperation with Turkey despite problems on the political and diplomatic fronts. Prospects for cooperation in the field of energy are subject to the global energy environment, but both countries are pragmatic enough to cooperate on this issue if and when conditions allow. Egypt proved to be a critical player in the region, which Turkey realized during the crisis in Libya, and the delimitation processes in the Eastern Mediterranean. It has become clear that the key to breaking Turkey's solitude in the region is to normalize its relations with Cairo. For now, the Erdoğan government uses intelligence channels to communicate with Cairo, but regional conditions will likely force Ankara to mend the broken relations in the future.

It is important to note that Turkey's diplomatic, political, and strategic predicament in the region does not necessarily mean it has no justifications in its arguments concerning its surrounding waters. Turkey's concerns are viable in at least two cases. If Greece initiates a delimitation process between its islands of Rhodes and Crete, and with Cyprus, this leaves very limited space for Turkey on its southern shores. And secondly, entitling the island of Kastellorizo an exclusive economic zone and continental shelf that disregards mainland Turkey would be unfair and against the equitable principle in international law.

For Turkey, the securitization of the (Eastern) Mediterranean has turned into the securitization of the EU, provoking old stereotypes towards Greece, the EU and the West. It should be reiterated that Mediterranean countries played a positive role both in the Med-7 conference convened by France in September 2020, and in the EU Council meeting on 1-2 October 2020. Especially, Italy, along with Malta and Spain, displayed more favorable attitudes toward Turkey both in the Libyan crisis and during tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The recent conflicts and crises in the region intensified anti-EU sentiments in Turkey, and the public has lost interest in the EU membership process. This may be good news for those in the EU who want to keep Turkey out of Europe, and for those in Turkey who want to keep the EU out of Turkey, but the EU cannot face losing Turkey, and the EU is too critical for Turkey to lose.

PROBLEMS, POTENTIALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BRUSSELS AND BERLIN

Each new crisis reveals the EU's weaknesses and divisions. The crises in Libya, Syria, and the standoff between Turkey, Greece and France highlighted the need for the EU to take more decisive actions. The civil wars in Libya and Syria have persisted for 10 years now, and any comprehensive peace plan to end the conflicts in these countries would contribute to the leadership of the EU at the global level. The Berlin Conference on Libya is a good start, but more energetic efforts are needed to force the warring sides to sit on the negotiation table. The EU should offer more than a cease-fire for the ongoing conflict at its doorstep and should come up with a concrete peace plan.

Despite its official position, the EU seems to pay less attention to human rights issues and democratization in the Mediterranean. A new push to promote human rights and democratization is imperative for stability in the region.

Germany played a balanced and constructive role in the Libyan conflict, and during recent Eastern Mediterranean tensions over maritime issues. This role should not be confined to Ger-

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13 European Council conclusions on external relation, 1 October 2020, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/10/02/european-council-conclusions-1-2-october-2020/

14 https://www.sondakika.com/haber/haber-bloomberg-erdogan-macron-dan-turkiye-nin-avrupa-13628591/

many's presidency rotation nor to the tenure of Chancellor Merkel. Germany has proven it could play a constructive role in mitigating conflicts.

It is difficult to understand the absence of the EU in the Syrian crisis. The EU spreads the image it is only interested in the refugee flow concerning the ongoing civil war in Syria.

A general summit meeting involving Mediterranean countries organized by the EU might help ease tensions and prepare the ground for further negotiations between disputing and conflicting parties.

As for EU-Turkish relations, the EU should strike a balance between the needs of its associate member, Turkey, and its full members. It is understandable the EU officially is poised to support its members for the sake of unity, but on the other hand, Turkish society needs to see that the EU has a balanced approach and assumes a fair attitude. Turkish society hopes for an evenhanded approach from the EU. The prevalent sentiment in Turkey is that the EU is backing traditional foes of Turkey, which eventually plays into the hands of nationalist forces in the country.

Both NATO and the EU should take into account Turkey's legitimate concerns without bias.

The EU has found it more convenient to make deals with Erdoğan, as in the case of the 2016 Refugee agreement, as he is the ultimate decision-maker in the country. For a long time, the EU has diminished its ties with other political actors and civil society organizations.

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TURKEY AND THE MEDITERRANEAN IMBROGLIO

The story of an aspiring regional power

Turkey's assertive and militarized foreign policy have reached their limits in the Eastern Mediterranean, and as of late 2020, Ankara is seeking ways to exit its self-imposed impasse.

The recent conflicts and crises in the region intensified anti-EU sentiments in Turkey, and the public has lost interest in the EU membership process. This may be good news for those in the EU who want to keep Turkey out of Europe, and for those in Turkey who want to keep the EU out of Turkey, but the EU cannot face losing Turkey, and the EU is too critical for Turkey to lose.

As for EU-Turkish relations, the EU should strike a balance between the needs of its associate member, Turkey, and its full members. It is understandable the EU officially is poised to support its members for the sake of unity, but on the other hand, Turkish society needs to see that the EU has a balanced approach and assumes a fair attitude.

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