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Eastern Mediterranean: gas, tensions and sabre rattling

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On 20 June 2019, after “Fatih”, the second Turkish drill ship “Yavuz” left the Dilova port to sail into the Mediterranean Sea. According to Turkish media, Yavuz shall start from July on its petroleum and gas exploration works in the Eastern Mediterranean. While Turkish Energy and Natural Resources Minister Fatih Dönmez celebrated the launch with the words “*Now we’re also part of the game,*” [“Yavuz’ Akdeniz’e açılıyor”, *PETROTURK*, June 20, 2019], the Turkish action prompted harsh reactions from Greece, the EU and the US that see in Ankara’s “illegal” drilling action a provocation. Turkish F-16 fighter jets escorted the drill ship after the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) had issued arrest warrants for the staff of Fatih, culminating in renewed rising tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Military threatening gestures between the two conflicting neighbours are nothing new. The current spiral of escalation though, bears the potential of having far-reaching implications for the whole region and beyond since this time bigger stakes are at play.

“This is the biggest discovery [of natural gas] so far in Cyprus’s exclusive economic [maritime] zone and, based on official data, one of the biggest worldwide in the last two years,” Energy Minister of RoC, Georgios Lakkotrypis, said at a news conference in Nicosia [Helena Smith, “Huge gas discovery off Cyprus could boost EU energy security”, *The Guardian*, February 28, 2019].

Simultaneously, the Turkish navy carried out its biggest naval exercise (Denizkurdu-Sea Wolf) so far, showing off the whole equipment of its domestic armament production operating in the Black Sea, the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. For the first time, armed and unarmed drones were presented while the spectacle was accompanied by air force units and army aviators. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan underlined that warships and the Air Force have extensive powers to use all necessary means to deter any violation of Turkish rights and interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Prior to that, in February 2018, and after the first major discoveries of natural gas in the gas field Aphrodite in 2011, the Italian energy company ENI and the French company Total announced another breakthrough gas discovery off the Cypriot coast. In reaction to that, Turkish warships interdicted further exploratory drillings of ENI within the EEZ of the RoC. In August of the same year Turkey decided to build a military base in northern Cypriot Famagusta (Gazimagusa) and to extend its military air base in Lefkoniko (Geçitkale).

The quest for power and ownership over seabed resources in the Eastern Mediterranean dates back to 2009 when the first natural gas discoveries were made by Noble Energy in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Israel. Gas fields were first found in waters off Cyprus in 2011. Since then, global oil and gas companies made significant findings in the Levantine Basin and the Eastern Mediterranean, several of them embedded within the EEZ of the RoC. The latest significant discovery of natural gas offshore within the EEZ of the RoC was made by the US energy giant ExxonMobil and Qatar Petroleum in February this year during deep-water drillings south of the coastal city of Limassol. Since 2009, Eastern Mediterranean discoveries amount to around 2.100 billion cubic meters of natural gas, including the latest big find offshore Cyprus, at Glaucus-1 well, announced by ExxonMobil. By comparison, EU consumption in 2017 — the region's closest major gas market — was around 410 billion cubic meters. This would diversify significantly the EU's energy suppliers and reduce Europe's dependence for energy imports on global leader Russia.

The two recent gas reserve discoveries off of Cyprus together with the Israeli Tamar and Leviathan gas field discoveries in 2009 and 2010 and the major discovery off the coast of Egypt in the Zohr field in 2015 – which is estimated to hold the largest capacity – are geostrategic game changers, hinting at the economic potential of the still largely underexplored hydrocarbon reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The snag is – while almost all the Eastern Mediterranean coastal states benefit from the richness of natural reserves the Eastern Mediterranean has to offer, Turkey comes away empty-handed.

The EEZ defines the zone where coastal nations have jurisdiction over natural resources prescribed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Cyprus has signed several delimitation agreements over EEZ with Mediterranean states. In late January 2007, the RoC divided its claimed EEZ into 13 licencing blocks and went out for international tenders. Blocks 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7 partly overlap with the Turkish-proclaimed Continental Shelf (CS), being one major source of conflict over sovereign rights between the two neighbouring states.

Because of the Aegean Conflict with Greece, Turkey is not a signatory member of UNCLOS. Accordingly, Turkey has no CS- or EEZ-related legislation nor does any EEZ proclamation exist for the Mediterranean or the Aegean Seas. The Turkish perspective is that certain provisions of UNCLOS jeopardize vital interests of Turkey in the Aegean that thus have to be handled bilaterally with the RoC. Ankara's only agreement over maritime borders in the region is with the self-

proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). In 2014 Turkey submitted to the UN the geographical coordinates of its CS in the Eastern Mediterranean, as established by a delimitation agreement with the TRNC. The TRNC is recognized only by Turkey and hence internationally isolated. In the International Community's view, the Turkish army is occupying the northern part of Cyprus which invalidates any Turkish claim to have a share in the hydrocarbon gamble.

Thus, being side-lined, the only option left for Ankara is flexing muscles while the contours of an emerging energy market between the Eastern Mediterranean coastal states are shaped.

In October 2018, during a trilateral summit in Greek Crete, Athens, Nicosia and Cairo agreed to cooperate in the field of energy. Furthermore, Egypt re-positioned in the Cyprus question totally in favour of the RoC. On 14 January 2019 Greece, Israel, RoC, Egypt, Jordan, Italy and the Palestine Authority established in Cairo the “East Mediterranean Gas Forum” (EastMed). This forum is ought to become a future organization regulating a common gas market in the region, making EastMed competitive in the world market.

Experts see this step as a clear signal against Turkey, attempting to thwart Turkish ambitions to evolve as the main hub for gas distribution in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Accordingly, the Turkish response was clear. *“Our actions in our region of authority will continue without giving up on our legitimate and legal rights. We made clear [towards the UN] that the unilateral agreements of Cyprus [Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus] with neighbouring states to disseize the rights of Turkey and northern Cyprus [TRNC] have no validity. Cyprus cannot speak on issues that concern the whole of the island. Beyond that, I want to once more reiterate that we reject any attempts of non-regional state actors to position itself as an international court or decision-making body to define [maritime] borders in the region. We are determined to defend the rights of Turkey and the TRNC”*, stated Dönmez [Fatih Dönmez, *Twitter*, May 7, 2019].

However, while Turkey is requesting with all its strength to be indeed “part of the game,” the West unitedly steps up its support for the RoC.

On 20 March 2019 U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo participated in a meeting of the Israeli, Greek and Cypriot Prime Ministers in Jerusalem. At the meeting the four states officially stated to support *“peace, stability, security and prosperity in the Eastern Mediterranean”* and to *“defend the independence of decisions in the realm of energy policy and the security in the Eastern Mediterranean against harmful, external influence”* – a message directed at Ankara [“After trilateral summit, leaders agree to defend against

‘malign influences’ in the region”, *ekathimerini.com*, March 20, 2019]. Only three weeks later, Republican and Democrat Senators introduced a bill that asks for the cancellation of the arms embargo against the RoC that was decided in 1987. It demands further the integration of the RoC in the Partnership for Peace Program of the NATO and provides for a deepening energy and defines cooperation between Washington and Nicosia. The same bill requests the exit of Turkish suppliers from the F-35 program in retaliation for the procurement of Russian S-300 air defence missiles.

Following suit, at the EU summit in Brussels on 21 June, the EU warned Turkey over illegal drilling actions in the Eastern Mediterranean, threatening Ankara with sanctions. “*The European Council endorses the invitation to the [EU] Commission and the EEAS [European External Action Service] to submit options for appropriate measures without delay, including targeted measures*” the statement said [“European Council conclusions on the MFF, climate change, disinformation and hybrid threats, external relations, enlargement and the European Semester, 20 June 2019”, *European Council*, June 20, 2019].

Consequently, in the light of Ankara’s increasing regional and international diplomatic isolation on many fronts, a political solution that regards its interests as well, seems to fade. A glance at Ankara’s international standing back in 2011 and today exemplifies this: back then, Turkish Minister for EU Affairs, Egemen Bağış, threatened to freeze relations with the EU should the RoC assume EU Presidency, while EU restrained from taking stance.

Today, after the US, EU threats of sanctions reach a new level of diplomatic escalation with seemingly no signs of mediation with Turkey. Putting it more clearly, even arch-enemies Israel and Lebanon are able to negotiate over the distribution of natural resources while Turkey – NATO ally and formally still EU-accession candidate – faces a deadlock. “*I absolutely don’t see rising tensions in the east Mediterranean. For the first time in history Israel and Lebanon are about to sit at the same table and discuss face to face. That is historic,*” commented Joseph Paritzky, private energy broker and former Israeli Energy Minister, referring to last month’s announcement about coming talks on maritime borders [Sergio Matalucci, “EastMed gas: Paving the way for a new geopolitical era?”, *Deutsche Welle*, June 24, 2019].

Would the situation have been more favourable for Turkey if its international standing would have been better? It is doubtful. As explained before, the current situation is mainly due to the non-recognition of the TRNC internationally. However, compared to former reactions by the international community when the diplomatic relations with Ankara were based on partnership, one

can detect a certain degree of reticence and a mediating approach. The only option that would have taken Turkish and TRNC interests into accord would have been the integration of northern Cyprus within a federal structure. The EU, UN, and Turkey advocated for this option back in 2004 based on the Annan Plan Referendum; the Cypriots rejected the reunification.

In conclusion, neither in the short- nor in the long-term, there seems to be any legal or political solution to the conflict that will satisfy Turkey. Nor were the stakes at play as high as they are today, leaving no other option to Turkey but flexing muscles while the pie is divided in the Eastern Mediterranean. The muscle flexing bears a high risk of translating into real military action since Ankara is determined to defend its national interests at any cost. Putting it with the words of Prof Athanasios Dokos, expert on international relations in Athens *“If the amount of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean and its economic value is indeed as high as announced, this will either bring – including a solution over the Cyprus Conflict – all stakeholders at the negotiation table – or will lead to a great war”* [Stelyo Berberakis, “Doğ u Akdeniz’de doğ al gaz gerilimi” *Deutsche Welle Türkçe*, February 28, 2019].





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