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Gas, sabre rattling and worse

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.

One month before, as an expression of Turkish decisiveness for regional ownership, 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 three areas of the Black Sea, the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. For the first time, armed and unarmed drones were deployed together with Air Force (Türk Hava Kuvvetleri) and Army Aviation (Türk Kara Havacılık Komutanlığı) assets. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan underlined that these forces have all the authority to employ all necessary means to deter any violation of Turkish rights and interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The recent spiral of escalation comes after the two biggest discoveries of natural gas so far were made offshores the RoC within the last year. The RoC claims to have full authority over the gas fields which lie within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) prescribed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In late January 2007, the RoC divided its EEZ into 13 licensing 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 neighboring states. Because of the Aegean Conflict with Greece, Turkey is not a signatory member of UNCLOS. Ankara’s only agreement over maritime borders in the region exist with the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) which is recognized only by Turkey and hence

internationally isolated. Accordingly, the Turkish army is occupying the northern part of Cyprus which invalidates any Turkish claim to have a share in the hydrocarbon gamble.

The conflict gained new momentum when on 14 January 2019 Greece, Israel, RoC, Egypt, Jordan, Italy and the Palestine Authority established in Cairo the “East Mediterranean Gas Forum” (EastMed) – excluding Turkey. The forum is ought to become a future organization regulating a common gas market in the region, making EastMed competitive in the world market.

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]. Earlier, in March, the US took position on the side of the RoC, threatening Ankara with determined counter-reaction. Today, after the US, EU threats of sanctions reach a new level of diplomatic escalation with seemingly no signs of mediation with Turkey.

The quest for power and ownership over seabed resources in the Eastern Mediterranean is not new. However, never were the stakes at play as high as they are today. Thus, being sidelined, the Turkish 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, “Doğu Akdeniz’de doğal gaz gerilimi” *Deutsche Welle Türkçe*, February 28, 2019].

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