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# New Balance of Power in the Eastern Mediterranean and Turkey

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## Executive Summary

Currently, the Eastern Mediterranean Sea is brewing as a region of potential conflict rather than cooperation due to continuous geo-political and geo-economic competition among various actors, not only at the national level but also at regional and strategic levels. Turkey, having one of the longest coasts in the Mediterranean Sea, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) are facing both military-naval challenges and new U.S.-based alignments that aim to prevent both the TRNC and Ankara from exercising their legal rights in the Mediterranean Sea. In this challenging environment, Turkey continues to be active diplomatically while also feeling obliged to uphold its legal rights by conducting searches for hydro-carbon energy by means of newly acquired seismic drilling vessels – usually under the protection of its upgraded naval fleet. This analysis seeks to explain why Western/U.S. behavior is building confrontational alignments aimed at excluding both Turkey and the TRNC from the ongoing Mediterranean balance of power game, and why President Trump's current shortsighted Mediterranean strategy is doomed to fail in bringing peace to the Mediterranean region in general.

# New Balance of Power in the Eastern Mediterranean and Turkey

Prof. Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney\*

## I. Introduction

The Eastern Mediterranean Sea, due to ongoing geo-political and geo-economic competition among various actors, both at the national and regional-strategic levels, has become a region of potential conflicts rather than one of cooperation. Recently Turkey, with one of the longest coasts in the Mediterranean Sea, together with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), is facing not only military-naval challenges to its survival, but also the recently launched U.S.-based alignments that aim to prevent the TRNC and Ankara from exercising their legal rights in the Mediterranean Sea. The Mediterranean Sea is now hosting navies from about 44 different countries. This new, alarming militarization of the region not only involves the navies of various states, but also includes various Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capacities of external powers. Hence Turkey, in this challenging environment in the Mediterranean area, while trying to be active diplomatically, also feels obliged to uphold its legal rights by carrying out hydro-carbon energy exploration by means of newly acquired seismic drilling vessels – usually under the protection of its upgraded naval fleet. This analysis seeks to explain why U.S./Western behavior is building a new confrontational alignment aimed at excluding Turkey and the TRNC from the Mediterranean basin, and why U.S. President Trump's newly-launched Mediterranean strategy is doomed to fail and is likely to sow seeds of more conflict in the Mediterranean region rather than peace.

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The present geo-political and geo-economic rivalry between the Russian Federation and Western forces that is evolving in the Mediterranean can be explained by the rise of a new cold war between Moscow and the Euro-Atlantic world. More alarming, Washington's attempts to form new alliances in the Mediterranean basin may well exacerbate this current strategic rivalry. What is going on at the strategic level between Moscow and Washington is undoubtedly affecting the Eastern Mediterranean as the shatterbelt of the Middle East. Hence, Turkey, along with other coastal states in the Mediterranean, is finding itself responding to the emerging side effects of these geo-political and geo-economic developments. Therefore, to refresh our memories, it is necessary to summarize the current and recent issues that have made the Mediterranean region today a more complex and riskier place.

### *Russia's Increasing Presence*

The history of recent American involvement in the Middle East in general, and particularly the Obama administration's uncertain strategy in Syria, have played a great role in the creation of today's volatile conditions. In this regard, the Obama administration's leading-from-behind strategy surely created a great window of opportunity for Moscow. Russia skillfully judged the situation and decided to come in and fill the power gap – to take a stand with the Assad regime in Syria where Moscow thought it necessary to strengthen its position in the newly developing Eastern Mediterranean power nexus. In Russia's view, the U.S., under the Obama administration and later with President Trump, is planning to create a new Middle East via the creation of new Middle Eastern alignments, and is certainly aiming to sideline Moscow, both in terms of energy calculations as well as in the creation of a U.S.-based zone of influence in the region. Of course, this new alignment also affects the other members of the Astana trio (Turkey, Russia and

Iran). The main turning point that brought Russia back to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was when the Assad regime, in 2015, called on Moscow to help in its fight against the opposition. Since then, Moscow has strengthened its military presence via its A2/AD capability in the Eastern Mediterranean to a point that really alarmed NATO and the U.S., prompting them to increase their naval presence in the area. This ongoing rivalry between the West and Russia, coupled with increased naval presence and repeated naval military exercises in the Mediterranean basin in the last decade, is naturally increasing the tension in the region both among littoral as well as external powers.

### *Aftershocks of the Arab Spring*

Another factor bringing the military might of coastal and external powers to the Eastern Mediterranean is the effects of the Arab Spring, which continue to be felt in the MENA region. Since 2011, the Middle East and North Africa have entered a state of uncertainty, especially with the rise of many conflicts (e.g. in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya) that have resulted in long-lasting civil and proxy wars. This situation then gave rise to the existence of failed/failing states in the region; neighboring and external powers have found it easy to intervene in the domestic matters of these fractured states. Some of these states in the MENA region, such as Libya, Egypt and Syria, have become battlegrounds for either civil or proxy wars managed by external powers, and this situation has turned the Mediterranean basin into an area of constant volatility. This instability in turn has encouraged the emergence of radical terrorist groups to fill the power gaps left by failing states, thereby creating a more chaotic environment where outside states have found a convenient excuse to intervene on the pretext of fighting against terrorism.



## *Hydrocarbon Discoveries*

Furthermore, the discovery of hydrocarbon reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, first by Israel in 2009, followed by others near the southern part of the island of Cyprus, have caught the attention of various international oil/gas companies and brought them to the region. It is well-known that the two parts of Cyprus have equal rights by law over the use of the hydro-carbon resources around the island. The Greek Cypriots however, after establishing their own so-called Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in 2004, without the consent of the Turkish Cypriots, started to establish bilateral agreements with Egypt in 2003, Lebanon in 2007 and Israel in 2010, and invited international companies to make explorations around the island; hence, a new dispute came into being in the Eastern Mediterranean.

## *II. Gas Discoveries Bring Added Problems to the Balance of Power Equation in the Mediterranean*

Since gas was first discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean in the 2000s, during the Obama administration it was believed that the natural resources in and around Cyprus could be a key facilitator in unlocking the various political tensions prevalent in the area. According to the UN Law of the Sea, coastal states have a right to 320 km of maritime territory from their coast, or from a baseline drawn off their coast.<sup>1</sup> However, because of the concave shape of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, there is an overlap in the areas each country can legally claim, and this situation clearly requires negotiation and compromise.<sup>2</sup> As noted above, since the beginning of the 2000s, some experts and politicians have thought this overlapping situation could be used as an opportunity to exert leverage in various ongoing conflicts. On the contrary however, after the Greek Cypriots signed

an agreement on the delineation of a Greek Cypriot EEZ with Lebanon, Egypt and Israel, to which Turkey naturally objected on the grounds that it ran against the 'Turkish Cypriots' inalienable equal rights to the gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, this situation exacerbated the existing tensions prevalent between Turkey, Greece, and Southern Cyprus.<sup>3</sup> As the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs underlined:

The Greek Cypriot administration, as it is known, does not represent in law or in fact the Turkish Cypriots and Cyprus as a whole... Hence, the Greek Cypriot administration is not entitled to negotiate or conclude international agreements nor to adopt laws regarding the exploitation of natural resources on behalf of the entire island... Turkey's official stand is very clear: the issue of natural resources should be part of a comprehensive settlement in Cyprus.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the unilateral Greek Cypriot activities did not help the recently failed settlement negotiations held in Crans-Montana; on the contrary, they are still producing a negative atmosphere between the two sides. Moreover, "the unilateral Greek Cypriot actions not only disregard Turkish Cypriots' existing legitimate rights but also challenge Turkey's maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean in the west of the island."<sup>5</sup> It is a fact that, "apart from the issue of Cyprus, Ankara has legitimate and legal rights existing in the Mediterranean particularly to the west of longitude 32 16 18 E which have been registered in the UN. Hence, it is very natural for Turkey to protect its rights in its maritime jurisdiction areas."<sup>6</sup> In this vein, besides its categorical position on the Cyprus issue, Turkey has also raised an objection to the Greek Cypriot-Egyptian EEZ agreement due to the fact that it violates Turkey's continental shelf, where Turkey exercises *ab initio* and *ipso facto* legal rights in accordance with international law.

Recently, another major point of dispute has arisen due to the EU's open and the U.S.'s covert (until March 2019) support for the EastMed pipeline project, which is designed to transport gas from Israel, through Cyprus-Greece, and finally to Italy. Many experts have already expressed their doubts that the EastMed pipeline will ever become operational.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Brenda Shaffer thinks that this project's days are numbered due to the enormous technical difficulties in terms of construction: it would be the deepest and longest underwater pipeline in the world and would probably entail a cost of at least 7 billion dollars;<sup>8</sup> some experts think the costs could even reach 10 billion dollars. Also, according to other expert forecasts, the final price of gas via the EastMed pipeline would be 2.5 times the current price of Russian gas in the market. In the event of the EastMed project becoming operational, it is expected to bring 10 billion bcm of gas per year from off-shore reserves in Cyprus and Israel to Greece and Italy – with the planned Poseidon pipeline connection.<sup>9</sup> Even though exporting 10 bcm/yr gas from the EastMed region is quite important, it would only be the equivalent of two percent of annual European gas consumption. Even more striking, the most technically challenging part of the EastMed project is the section from Cyprus to Crete, which reaches a depth of over 3,000m. Though it is considered possible to lay a pipe at such depths, it is actually a very challenging job. The terrain under the Mediterranean Sea between southern Cyprus and Crete is very uneven and hence the pipeline might require difficult repairs in the future due to the area's seismic activity. Moreover, the EastMed pipeline project so far has won the support of only four governments, together with the EC, and verbal support from the Trump administration, and no international oil company or investor has expressed interest to join in.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, despite these impediments, the EU has come to the conclusion that EastMed could be thought of as one possibility for alternative pipeline routes for the Union to overcome Brussels' dependency on gas supply from

Russia. In the last few years, talks between the leaders of Greece, Israel and the Greek Cypriots to bring the EastMed pipeline into being have continued, because it is a politically-motivated project.

If EastMed gets realized, it is going to pass through Turkish territorial waters, in which case one expects the project holders and Ankara to reach a compromise on the issue. As of yet, however, the project owners have not knocked on Ankara's door in this regard. Since Turkey and the TRNC have territorial disputes with the Greek Cypriot government, at the end of the day, Ankara is expected to oppose the EastMed project on the grounds that Greece, the Greek Cypriots, and Israel are conspiring to bypass and violate the Turkish Cypriots' inalienable rights around the island. Moreover, there are other impediments to be surmounted before EastMed can be realized in the near future. For instance, Egypt is a candidate for the export of EastMed gas via its underutilized gas liquefaction plants that Cairo considers more accessible and convenient. Egypt's thesis is based on the argument that the EastMed initiative is still in the feasibility stage and hence it is expected to take a few more years to be completed.<sup>11</sup>

According to La Stampa, although the Italian government was expected to conclude a definitive EastMed agreement by the end of March 2019, Rome is now saying that it wants to put a brake on the project.<sup>12</sup> The excuse that the Rome government found was that they are under pressure from environmental activists in the country and they need time to order a new environmental impact assessment.<sup>13</sup>

Some observers assert that the government in charge is trying to gain time before the upcoming elections in Italy. But there is no clear indication whether EastMed will be unlocked or not after the elections. Another problem is Lebanon's objection. The Lebanon government has sent warnings to its Mediterranean neighbors that it will not allow the mooted pipeline to violate its shores.

Consequently, it can be seen that Turkey and the TRNC are not alone in maritime jurisdiction disputes in the Mediterranean. The international community is now aware that, in a maritime border dispute with Israel, the Beirut government will not allow the Tel-Aviv government to encroach on Lebanon's sovereign right and jurisdiction over its EEZ. Moreover, in line with international law, it is imperative that the delineation of the course for the laying of pipelines on the continental shelf is subject to the consent of the coastal states. Therefore, it is quite irrational to act in such manner as if Turkey's consent is already received for the project, since the planned route of this project falls within Turkey's continental shelf in the Mediterranean.

### III. Turkey is Developing a New Mediterranean Strategy in the Face of the Changing Balance of Power in the Eastern Mediterranean

Turkey, like Greece, has not yet proclaimed an Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ) for the Mediterranean Sea, yet Turkey has been fully exercising its rights over the continental shelf, as its outer limits have been submitted to the UN since 2004, and the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) was granted offshore licenses on Turkey's continental shelf in 2009 and 2012. On the other hand, in retaliation for the Greek Cyprus's declaration of the so-called EEZ in 2004, Ankara signed an agreement in 2011 with the TRNC to delineate the continental shelf. Based on this agreement, and in line with their inherent and inalienable rights as the co-owners of the island, after seeing the Greek Cypriot administration proceeding with unilateral offshore drilling activities, the Government of TRNC issued permits to TPAO to begin oil/gas exploration around the maritime areas of the island. In the face of increasing Greek Cypriot illegitimate acts in the Mediterranean Sea around Cyprus, Ankara has felt obliged to issue Navtex from time to time, to carry out naval exercises or bring

its naval vessels to the area with the aim of deterring the foreign hydro-carbon firms' illegal operations and to protect its seismic ship's exploration around Cyprus.

In the face of the growing presence of foreign navies and their increasing A2/AD capacities, Turkey, in addition to pursuing diplomatic and lawful acts to protect its and Northern Cyprus' alienable rights in the Mediterranean, has also accelerated the modernization of its navy. This need has arisen from the changing balance of power in the Mediterranean basin where the U.S., under President Trump, is aiming to construct a new Mediterranean strategic frontier<sup>14</sup> involving Israel, Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Greek Cyprus and Greece against the states of Iran and Russia, and, to a certain extent, Turkey. It is no secret that Washington is at odds with Ankara on a number of issues associated with the Eastern Mediterranean: Syria, energy pipelines in the Mediterranean, and of course the Cyprus issue are on top of the list. Hence, we can now talk about the rise of a new cold war in the Mediterranean basin between two opposing groups of states backed by Washington and Moscow. Moreover, we are also witnessing the gradually increasing appearance of another external power, China, in the Mediterranean, not only in the economic realm but also via its naval exercises. Of course, the importance of the Mediterranean Sea has become more significant from the standpoint of China's plans for the One Belt and One Road Initiative.<sup>15</sup>

All in all, in the face of shifting alliances in the Mediterranean basin, Turkey needs to act in a realistic way and hence get prepared for future assertive and offensive policies that might be projected to the Mediterranean basin by any of the external powers. This holds true for both Russia and the United States of America, and even China perhaps, in the future. Ankara and Moscow have close relations now, but no one can be sure what the future may bring. Turkey, for both

geo-political and geo-economic reasons, might in the future be facing a more aggressive Russia with its newly established anti-access/anti denial bubbles very close to the Turkish hinterland. According to some energy experts, Russia is expected to become more active if the U.S./EU-based EastMed project becomes a reality in conjunction with new gas findings in the future.<sup>16</sup>

Moscow is already a player in the Mediterranean region's energy game where its companies are associated with countries like Egypt and Syria. When Russia answered a legitimate call from the Assad regime in 2015 to fight against DAESH, Moscow took this opportunity to strengthen its military presence in eastern Syria.<sup>17</sup> As a result, Moscow has already succeeded in placing itself in the midst of future energy competitions that will perhaps intensify in the Eastern Mediterranean. When that time comes, Russia cannot be expected to retreat from acting aggressively against others, including the U.S., if a need arises to ensure its primary role in exporting gas to the European market.

Similarly, under the present conditions in the Mediterranean, Ankara cannot be expected to trust a NATO that is operating under the new uncertainties created by the Trump administration. Moreover, the recent open support given by Washington to the instigators of the EastMed project – as part of its policy of viewing the Mediterranean as the new strategic frontier – which aims to bypass Turkey from the likely projected pipeline, is quite enough justification for Ankara to get prepared in the fields of law and diplomacy together with the military realm. That is why Turkey, since 2015, has been working on upgrading both its naval and air power capabilities.

Felipe Sanches Tapia<sup>18</sup> believes that the increasing naval presence, especially in the last decade, of external powers in the Eastern basin of

the Mediterranean (which is included in the shatterbelt of the Middle East), is, as in the case of Turkey and others who can afford it, forcing coastal states to develop the capabilities of their own navies and air forces. The Turkish navy, without a doubt, remains the most powerful of all the coastal states' navies in the region. Turkey's navy is engaged in an ambitious program aimed at modernizing and expanding its capabilities, which includes the technical development of its naval industry so that it can decrease foreign dependency in this matter (2033 vision).<sup>19</sup> It is expected that by 2021, Turkey will expand its inventory with an amphibious ship-aircraft carrier similar to the Juan Carlos I of the Spanish navy, which will provide Turkey with an unparalleled ability to project force in the region.<sup>20</sup> This, and other developing capabilities of the Turkish navy, in addition to power projection, can also be used for humanitarian purposes in the Mediterranean where ongoing conflicts may require various rescue operations for refugees and others.

#### IV. Conclusion

When the Arab Spring in various parts of the Middle East turned into an Arab winter in several parts of the MENA region, this situation brought more instability to the region. The declining power of some states like Egypt and Libya, either because of the return of military tutelage systems or the outbreak of violent civil wars, first encouraged the rise of radical terrorist groups, then brought intervention by external and/or regional powers. The spillover effects of these negative developments soon started to be felt in Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics. For instance, a side effect of the Syrian civil war was seriously felt after Russia's return to the Eastern Mediterranean in 2015 on the invitation of the Assad regime. Since, then the Eastern Mediterranean has gradually become a stage for the development of new geo-strategic alignments, around either



Washington or Moscow. After 2015, Moscow's rapidly strengthening position, first in the Eastern Mediterranean via its A2/AD military capacity, together with negotiated diplomatic coalitions with Iran and Turkey under the Astana process, quickly attracted the attention of the U.S. That is why Washington decided to give covert support to countries like Greece, Greek Cyprus, Israel and Egypt in the Mediterranean, and to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Gulf. U.S. covert support soon became overt especially after these countries began oil and gas exploration in the Mediterranean. What is interesting is that the open support of the Trump administration coincided with the announcement of the American decision to withdraw troops from Syria.

Moreover, both regional and external powers active in the MENA region have found various excuses and justifications – such as fighting terrorism or preventing the use of chemical weapons – to bring their naval forces in large numbers to the Mediterranean Sea, leading to a new militarization of this area. Currently, the navies of nearly 44 different nations are present in the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, licenses issued by the Greek Cypriots relying on their so-called EEZ have aroused the interest of several foreign gas-oil companies in conducting seismic explorations in the Mediterranean Sea around Cyprus, despite the fact that the maritime delineation of the sea issue has not yet been resolved. This decision, of course, has made the situation much more complex. In the case of Turkey and Northern Cyprus, in response to the illegitimate acts by Greek Cypriots in the Mediterranean Sea around Cyprus, Ankara has felt obliged to issue Navtex, and bring its naval vessels to the area with the aim of either deterring illegal activities or protecting its seismic ship's explorations around Cyprus.

The discoveries of new natural gas fields since the 2000s additionally complicate relations among states in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Policy-makers like President Obama were wrong to expect, when gas was found first in Israel in 2009 and then in Cyprus, that gas discoveries would serve as an impetus for furthering peace and cooperation in the solving of various problems such as the Cyprus issue and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Brenda Shaffer rightfully asserts, “gas discoveries have done little to promote peace in the region.”<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, these findings, Shaffer believes, have increased the likelihood of conflict in the region, as disputes over the delineation of maritime borders arose in the Eastern Mediterranean. Especially after the Greek Cypriots issued the so-called EEZ on their own and awarded drilling rights to international companies without the consent of the Republic of Northern Cyprus, this situation naturally increased tensions in the Mediterranean.<sup>22</sup>

Since geo-political and geo-economic rivalry among the external great powers is continuing in the Mediterranean on a number of issues, this situation is bringing negative spillover effects to coastal states. The Trump administration's recent focus on constructing a gas-based alliance among the states of Greece, Greek Cyprus and Israel, in opposition to Turkey and Russia, is set to boil over in 2019. The construction of new pipelines like the proposed EastMed project that aim to exclude Turkey will not contribute to peace in the region. Russia is more likely to stand against it together with Turkey so as not to lose its European gas export hegemony. Hence, under the present conditions, it is reasonable to assert that the Trump administration's projected strategy for the Mediterranean is doomed to fail because both the coastal states as well as external powers have already engaged in very risky gunboat diplomacy. Those who supported and continue to support peace pipelines in the name of bringing cooperation to the Mediterranean basin will soon realize that they are wrong. According to Shaffer, to date there is not even one case in international politics of a peace pipeline where the lure of energy trade served to resolve

interstate conflicts. Hence, as she suggests, it would more beneficial to concentrate on conflict prevention in the Mediterranean basin rather than promoting so-called 'peace pipelines' like the EastMed project that exclude both Turkey and the TRNC. Otherwise, the current gunboat diplomacy will simply raise tensions among actors in Mediterranean geo-politics which will likely lead to a lose-lose scenario.

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## NOTES

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## About SAM

Center for Strategic Research of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (SAM) is a think-tank and a research center which is chartered by law and has been active since May 1995. SAM was established as a consultative body to provide Turkish Foreign Policy decision makers with scholarly and scientific assessments of relevant issues, and reviews Turkish foreign policy with a futuristic perspective.

SAM conducts research, organizes scholarly events relevant to the ever expanding spectrum of Turkish Foreign Policy in cooperation with both Turkish and foreign academicians, its counterparts from around the world as well as various universities and government agencies. SAM provides consultancy to the foreign ministry departments as well as some other state institutions in foreign policy issues while also establishing regional think-tank networks.

In addition to its role of generating up-to-date information, reliable data and insightful analysis as a think-tank, SAM functions as a forum for candid debate and discussion for anyone who is interested in both local and global foreign policy issues. Increasingly, SAM has become a center of attraction since it successfully brings scholars and policy makers together for exchange of ideas in panels, in-house meetings, seminars and training programs for young diplomats.

SAM has a widening range of publications. Along with its traditional publication, Perceptions, which is a quarterly English language journal that hosts distinguished Turkish and international scholars within its pages, SAM has initiated Vision Papers which expresses the views of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, and SAM Papers that covers the current debates of foreign policy by various scholars.

With its commitment to contribution to the body of knowledge and constructive debate particularly in Turkish Foreign Policy, SAM will continue to serve as an indispensable think-tank and research center given its role promoting interaction and mutual benefits among the MFA, NGOs, other think-tanks and the broader scientific community and hence strengthen the human and intellectual capital of Turkey.



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