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Turkey is Making Waves in the Eastern Mediterranean

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Following the discovery of substantial natural gas reserves, a new ‘Great Game’ is emerging in the Eastern Mediterranean in which new alliances and conflicts are developing. From the northern shores of Egypt to the southern coast of Turkey, states are competing for control of the natural gas discoveries and energy routes. Turkey and its ally, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), are clashing with a developing energy and security cooperation bloc nicknamed ‘Club Med,’ which includes Egypt, Greece, the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), and Israel. During the summer of 2019, Turkey has been escalating its conflict with the RoC, dispatching warships, drilling and exploration ships into waters internationally recognized as part of the RoC’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). By expanding its naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey is attempting to claim potential gas deposits on behalf of the TRNC and prevent the RoC from developing its gas discoveries.¹ Turkey’s ambitious naval strategies have also been interpreted by some of its critics as exploiting the Cypriot gas dispute to exert a Turkish hegemonic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.²

In the beginning of May 2019, the Turkish drillship, “Fatih,” named after the fifteenth-century Ottoman conqueror of Istanbul and painted to resemble the Turkish flag, began its offshore drilling operations 75 kilometers off the western coast of Cyprus, within the RoC’s internationally recognized EEZ.³ The Fatih is accompanied by a Turkish seismic survey ship, the Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa, also painted like the Turkish flag and named after an Ottoman admiral, which is conducting natural gas exploration in an area already licensed by Nicosia to Italian oil giant Eni.⁴ Beyond this cadre of first-rate Ottoman namesakes, a second Turkish

drillship, “Yavuz” (meaning “inflexible” or “resolute”) arrived south of the Karpas Peninsula on the east of Cyprus on July 8, 2019. This is a section of the island that Ankara has unilaterally designated as a part of the de-facto TRNC since the 1974 Turkish invasion (or intervention from the Turkish perspective) following the pro-Greek Cypriot coup.⁵ While the international community condemns Turkey’s actions in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey argues that it is defending its maritime rights, as the ships fall within the Turkish continental shelf, and that it is operating on behalf of the Turkish Cypriots.⁶

Furthermore, the Turkish drilling and exploration ships are protected by an extensive Turkish military presence of naval vessels, submarines, drones, maritime patrol craft, and naval helicopters.⁷ In fact since 2004, Turkey has been developing and strengthening its navy with its \$3 billion “National Warship” program, called by its Turkish acronym MİLGEM, in order to deploy Turkey’s naval forces and gain strategic depth in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸ In September 2011, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan proclaimed Turkey’s *raison d’etat* as “residing in the Suez Canal, the adjacent seas, and from there extending to the Indian Ocean.”⁹ In line with this, the present goal of the expanded Turkish navy in the Eastern Mediterranean is to alter the balance of power and intimidate the so-called ‘Club Med’ members. In doing so, Turkey will thereby strengthen its foothold on the maritime energy routes and its leverage in the negotiations.¹⁰

While the international community interprets Turkey’s increased naval activity in the Eastern Mediterranean as combative, from the Turkish perspective, its strategy is defined as “proactive defense.”¹¹ In other words, Turkey perceives the Greek, Cypriot, and Israeli militaries as acting aggressively in the Aegean Sea and Eastern Mediterranean and disregarding the claims of the TRNC. For example, the RoC issued EEZ delimitation treaties with its neighbors (border agreements signed with Egypt in February 2003, Lebanon in 2006, and Israel in 2010¹²) and sold the rights to extract natural gas from its EEZ blocks before negotiations regarding natural gas profit sharing were concluded with the TRNC. Turkey argued that the RoC acted unilaterally and illegally, warranting an ostensibly defensive Turkish military response. Therefore, Turkey sees its naval activities as maintaining its maritime rights in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean and the Turkish Cypriots’ claims to the profits from the RoC exploitation of the hydrocarbon reserves.¹³

Although many reunification talks have been held since the division of the island in 1974, with the latest UN-led talks having taken place on August 9, 2019, all have broken down largely because of disputes regarding the Turkish military presence and the shared-governance of the island and its surrounding resources.¹⁴ Thus, Turkey's aggressive behavior is also motivated by its concern that the RoC's energy development will strengthen its hand in the future reunification negotiations and disincentivize compromise.¹⁵ As it stands, the RoC has greater economic and political strength than the TRNC because of its EU membership and international recognition.¹⁶ Turkey, therefore, would like to prevent the Greek Cypriots from obtaining an even greater economic advantage from its natural gas development, and in recent years has been willing to risk international confrontation and condemnation to achieve this goal.¹⁷ For example, in March 2018, following the discovery of the Calypso gas field by Eni and Total, Turkish warships forced a vessel contracted by Eni to withdraw from its drilling attempts in Block 3, east of Cyprus.¹⁸ Turkey has asserted the rights of the TRNC to the resources in the area, declaring all agreements between the RoC and international oil companies as invalid, which has drawn the outrage of international companies and foreign countries, including EU member states, Greece, Israel, and Egypt.¹⁹

On July 15, 2019, EU foreign ministers approved sanctions on Turkey because of its exploration activities in the RoC's territory; in response to which, Ankara vowed to continue drilling.²⁰ A week later, on July 22, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu conceded slightly, stating that the government would not send a third seismic ship to the Cypriot maritime territory as was originally intended, and offered a package deal that would negotiate the maritime disputes in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean.²¹ In response, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias and Greek Defense Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos insisted that Turkey must stop its illegal drilling and remove its ships from the RoC's EEZ and territorial waters.²² Two days later, President Erdoğan backtracked completely, declaring that European sanctions will not stop its drilling activities and it will continue to "protect" Turkish Cypriot rights.²³

A side effect of the growing dispute with Turkey is the strengthening of the RoC's relations with Israel and Egypt. Drawn into the growing diplomatic row, Israel and Egypt expressed support for the RoC in exercising its sovereign rights, stating that Turkish actions have increased tension in the Eastern Mediterranean region, and urging the countries to avoid escalation.²⁴ While the international dispute over Turkey's actions has heated up, the RoC, Israel, and Egypt have

managed to progress in their export plans and increase regional cooperation. For instance, Egypt hosted the first Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in Cairo in January 2019 and again in July 2019 in order to “create a regional market, cut infrastructure costs and offer competitive prices.” Its members include Egypt, RoC, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority; Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey are notably excluded.²⁵ Progress by the Club Med bloc has been achieved: Cairo approved an undersea pipeline connecting Cyprus’s Aphrodite (129 bcm) gas field and Egypt’s Edku gas liquefaction and export terminal²⁶ and closed on a \$15 billion deal with Israel to import natural gas from Israel’s Tamar (255 bcm) and Leviathan (491 bcm) gas fields into the Egyptian gas grid, which is projected to begin in October.²⁷ Thus, in this Great Game, Egypt is strengthening its position as an international trading and export center for gas, Israel and the RoC are creating deals to exploit their natural resources, and Turkey is making waves with its attempts to increase its role in the exploitation of the Eastern Mediterranean gas.

Turkey’s large military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean has not intimidated its regional rivals in the Club Med, who have increasingly excluded Ankara from energy decisions. Despite Ankara’s hostile foreign policy, it wants to be included in the regional energy policy decisions because it hopes to become a natural gas hub, with its existing infrastructure and large domestic market for natural gas. Turkey’s strategic geopolitical position as a land bridge connecting east to west, its 1577 kilometers of coastline in the northeastern Mediterranean, and expansive energy infrastructure with its many natural gas pipelines, including Blue Stream and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines (and projected to host TAP and TANAP), does indeed position the country as a player in the global energy market.²⁸ Moreover, Turkey’s domestic gas consumption has more than doubled in the last decade (from 18 bcm in 2002 to 39.5 bcm in 2011, currently standing at over 45 bcm).²⁹ As a significant consumer, Turkey is also interested in diversifying its gas imports; currently almost 60 percent of its natural gas comes from Russia and 20 percent from Iran.³⁰ Ultimately, as one of the largest powers in the Eastern Mediterranean economically, militarily, and in terms of energy consumption, Turkey’s actions demonstrate that it demands to be included in the energy decisions, because “an estranged Turkey will be even more assertive.”³¹

To conclude, the Eastern Mediterranean is undergoing an economic and geopolitical realignment towards Egypt, RoC, Greece, and Israel, which has led to increased tension with Turkey. Despite Turkey’s hostile actions, it has not interfered with the development of the major gas discoveries

south of Cyprus, and, thus, likely will not disrupt the region's broader efforts to develop its gas resources, especially considering the greater interests involved, including those of the US. On one hand, by limiting its aggressive stance to the region of Cyprus, Turkey will not enter direct conflict with major players like Israel, Egypt, and the US. On the other hand, the result of Turkey's hostile and unpredictable policy is exclusion from the energy market it wants to enter as it is perceived as unreliable. Turkish gunboat diplomacy promotes hawkish ideas of zero-sum thinking, blackmailing tactics, and brinkmanship. Although it is unlikely that Turkey's actions will greatly disrupt regional gas development, the presence of Fatih and the other first-rate Ottoman namesakes will likely have greater ripple effects on Turkey's geopolitical standing in the region and on the world stage.

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Notes

¹ Keith Johnson, "Turkey's Big Energy Grab." *Foreign Policy*, 25 July 2019.

² Endy Zemenides, "A Test for Turkey." *Kathimerini*, 10 May 2019.

³ Simon Henderson, "Turkey's Energy Confrontation with Cyprus." *Turkey's Energy Confrontation with Cyprus - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, 24 July 2019.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "Turkish Navy Fully Protecting Drilling Vessels in East Med." *DailySabah*, July 24, 2019.

⁷ Keith Johnson, "Turkey's Big Energy Grab." *Foreign Policy*, 25 July 2019.

⁸ Michael Tanchum, (2015) *A New Equilibrium: The Republic of Cyprus, Israel and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean Strategic Architecture*, Occasional Paper Series, Cyprus: PRIO Cyprus Centre and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, p. 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Rahmi Erkut Erdinçler, "Current Security Policies in Turkey on the Perspective of Defence Industry Technologies; A Reactivity-Proactivity Analysis." *Güvenlik Bilimleri Dergisi*, April 2019, p. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹² Stocker, James. "No EEZ Solution: The Politics of Oil and Gas in the Eastern Mediterranean." *The Middle East Journal* 66, no. 4 (January 2012): p. 584.

¹³ Rahmi Erkut Erdinçler, "Current Security Policies in Turkey on the Perspective of Defence Industry Technologies; A Reactivity-Proactivity Analysis." *Güvenlik Bilimleri Dergisi*, April 2019, p. 11.

¹⁴ Tom Miles, "Cyprus Reunification Talks Collapse, U.N. Chief 'Very Sorry'." *Reuters*, 7 July 2017.

¹⁵ Keith Johnson, "Turkey's Big Energy Grab." *Foreign Policy*, 25 July 2019.

¹⁶ Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, "Turkey at the Eastern Mediterranean Crossroads." *JISS*, 19 December 2018.

¹⁷ Keith Johnson, "Turkey's Big Energy Grab." *Foreign Policy*, 25 July 2019.

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- ¹⁸ Simon Henderson, "Turkey's Energy Confrontation with Cyprus." Turkey's Energy Confrontation with Cyprus - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, The Washington Institute, 24 July 2019.
- ¹⁹ "Turkey Advances Its Navy Buildup in East Med - Turkey News." Hürriyet Daily News, 23 July 2019.
- ²⁰ Simon Henderson, "Turkey's Energy Confrontation with Cyprus." Turkey's Energy Confrontation with Cyprus - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, The Washington Institute, 24 July 2019.
- ²¹ "Turkey Seeking East Med, Aegean Package Deal: Kathimerini." Kathimerini , 23 July 2019.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Simon Henderson, "Turkey's Energy Confrontation with Cyprus." Turkey's Energy Confrontation with Cyprus - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, The Washington Institute, 24 July 2019.
- ²⁴ Daren Butler, "Turkey Rejects Greek, EU Claims That Drilling off Cyprus Illegitimate." Reuters, 10 July 2019.
- ²⁵ "Minister Steinitz Visits Egypt as Historical Energy Deal Set to Start." The Jerusalem Post, 25 July 2019.
- ²⁶ Simon Henderson, "Turkey's Energy Confrontation with Cyprus." Turkey's Energy Confrontation with Cyprus - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, The Washington Institute, 24 July 2019.
- ²⁷ "Minister Steinitz Visits Egypt as Historical Energy Deal Set to Start." The Jerusalem Post, 25 July 2019.
- ²⁸ Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, "Turkey at the Eastern Mediterranean Crossroads." JISS, 19 December 2018.
- ²⁹ Oded Eran, Dan Vardi, and Itamar Cohen. "Political Feasibility of Israeli Natural Gas Exports to Turkey." The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), November 2014, p. 11.
- ³⁰ Efron, Shira. "The Future of Israeli-Turkish Relations." RAND Corporation, 2018, p. 19.
- ³¹ Zaman, Amberin. "Turkish Muscle Flexing in Mediterranean Rekindles Cyprus Peace Efforts." Al-Monitor, 26 July 2019.