

Eastern Mediterranean Manoeuvres: Alternatives to Greece and Turkey's Tensions

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Fossil fuels should be the energy source of the past but the struggle over new reserves continues in the Eastern Mediterranean, drawing interests from regional and global powers. What is at stake are two issues at the centre of Europe's politics: the climate crisis and geopolitics. Alia Papageorgiou and Yannis Paraskevopoulos explain the background to this dispute, rising nationalist sentiments on the Greek and Turkish side, and what an alternative based on peace, diplomacy and keeping fossil fuels in the ground could look like.

This summer's Greek-Turkish military tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean were the first to last more than a month, 10 times longer than previous incidents. It was also a first for several other countries to have an active military presence in the "hot" area: France, Italy, the United States, Israel, the United Arab Emirates in coordination with Greece and Cyprus, and Russia in joint exercises with Turkey. It's all still far from over, as Turkey backed-off again in mid-October resuming gas exploration – this time much closer to Greek territorial waters.

The Eastern Mediterranean – the open sea space between Crete, Cyprus, and the southern Anatolian coast – seems to be vital for more than one country. Turkey views it as its "soft underbelly", Greece as a bridge of defence integration with Cyprus (where both Greece and Turkey still have guarantors' rights), Cyprus as its gateway to Greece and the rest of Europe, and Israel as its strategic depth.

Currently, the main dispute concerns Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) rights and possible offshore gas and oil reserves. "Oruc Reis", a Turkish research vessel, is exploring the seabed in a disputed area with a series of Turkish warships as escorts. A similar Greek naval force followed and constantly protested the research.

A mediation attempt by the EU during the German presidency in July seemed to halt the research and tensions at first. But after a partial exclusive economic zone delimitation agreement in early August between Greece and Egypt – possibly with US and French mediation – the exploration resumed, thereby escalating tensions. The Greece-Egypt agreement was carefully formulated, leaving it open for Turkey to finally gain the most vital core of its exclusive economic zone ambitions in the currently disputed area. Nevertheless, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan denounced it as a "unilateral move by Greece", possibly fearing it was neutralising Turkey's [November 2019 Memorandum of Understanding](#) with the Turkish-backed GNA Libyan government – a precious diplomatic bargain chip in Turkey. This unratified MoU gives zero EEZ rights to any nearby island of third countries, including Crete.

A complex confrontation fuelled by fossil fuels

In the context of a growing climate crisis and of the EU's commitment to zero net emissions until 2050, such a dispute looks totally irrelevant and obsolete: to achieve even the (outdated and dangerously modest) target of 2 degrees Celsius, 80 per cent of the already confirmed fossil fuels reserves must definitely remain in the ground.

So why invest in searching for even more of them?

The answer is that the rush for new gas and oil projects, as well as for control on their transport routes, often proves a tool for geopolitical control and a catalyst for tension and conflict.

Since the start of the Israeli-Turkish confrontation in 2010, Turkey has invested heavily in its navy and presented a “blue fatherland” doctrine to maximise its potential exclusive economic zone. This doctrine asserts that only continental coasts can have EEZ rights – thus directly challenges Greek sovereignty on any island not explicitly named in border treaties and claims almost all of Cyprus’ formally delimited exclusive economic zone for the Turkish-Cypriot administration it supports in the north of the island. Its regional power aspirations are willingly supported by frequent shows of military force, albeit with no tangible gains up to now.

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Greece has adopted a goal for “an EEZ up to Cyprus” (often referred to in Greece as “the continental shelf of Kastelorizo island”, 72 miles east of Rhodes) which would drastically limit Turkey’s exclusive economic zone rights – no doubt a reason for Israel’s open support for this ambition. In spite of Turkey’s objections, this island of 500 inhabitants seems to definitely be entitled to exclusive Economic zone rights, albeit possibly reduced like the ones of similar minor Greek islands in the Ionian. However, a Greek exclusive economic zone could only reach “up to Cyprus” if full EEZ rights were also granted to the tiny nearby Stroggyli/Ros islet which currently lacks the permanent habitation history required by international courts.

Israel has forged a strategic alliance with Greece and Cyprus for the purpose of claiming advantages of scale for its own offshore gas projects, and to contain Turkey which it considers a serious rival. The controversial East-Med project – a 1900 kilometres, 7.5 billion euros gas submarine pipeline to Greece and Italy – actively pushed by Israel and subsidised by the EU, still in early stages, is an indirect statement that Greek exclusive economic zone rights reach Cyprus.

The battle for hearts and minds

The tensions have already influenced public opinion on both sides.

In Turkey, there is now an aggressive nationalistic outbidding, bitter portrayal of Greece as a pawn of Israel and the West, alongside the ongoing effort to demilitarise the Eastern Greek islands and revive Turkish claims for so-called islands of “unspecified sovereignty”. In reality, most of these islands are either included in the 1932 Turkish-Italian sea border delimitation agreement (when Italy ruled the Dodecanese), or inside recognised national territorial waters, while a few of them are populated and feature established Greek local authorities for more than 100 years.

Meanwhile, in Greece, a consensus is growing across the political spectrum for a renewed arms race, alongside support for any alliance “that would stop Erdogan” regardless of the track record of some allies (e.g. Israel or Saudi Arabia) on compliance to international law or the respect for human rights. US military bases are to be expanded, while arms purchase for 2021 will be five-fold the ones of 2020 as part of a 10 billion euros project. Most orders for air fighters, frigates and submarines seem to be oriented to prolonged operation capacities in open seas, rather than defending national borders and islands. EU creditors seem to now encourage this spending, as the lion’s share is going to European arms industries, especially French. Up to 17 000 new military jobs are to be created within

the next five years, along with a 33 per cent longer military service and an Israeli-style universal conscription of all males at the age of 18. A silver lining is the growing support for having the disputes urgently resolved through diplomatic means and international courts.

Can Green proposals break the deadlock?

Is there an easy way out of this situation? Parliamentary political parties in Greece share ambitions for new gas and oil projects, as well as support for the East-Med pipeline and the Greek-Israeli “strategic alliance”; it is a telling coincidence that only one Greek signature was among the 1080 European MPs and MEPs co-signing the [June 2020 public warning](#) against the announced Israeli plan to annex the Jordan Valley. In this context, the SYRIZA left-wing opposition is now even sometimes outbidding the current conservative government in a “strong stance” towards Turkey. The only notable exception is MERA25 (the Greek wing of DiEM25) which has recently reversed its previous position on a joint Greek-Turkish gas and oil projects, accepts a zero fossil fuels option, and calls for a conference of all Eastern Mediterranean countries to have exclusive economic zone rights delimited.

An obvious solution, currently only debated by the Greens, would be to indefinitely halt all gas and oil exploration, at least in all disputed areas until the exclusive economic zones are formally delimited. In such a context, the most crucial tool to create tensions and project military power would be sidelined.

In an era of mutual tensions, the Greens in Turkey and Greece opted to build bridges instead.

Central to the green proposal is, therefore, the notion of a “new Berne” in the Eastern Mediterranean, similar to the 1976 Greek-Turkish [Berne Agreement](#) which effectively froze all oil exploration in international waters in the Aegean. Such a face-saving proposal would be based on Article 83 of the UN International Maritime Law. In such a context, tensions with research vessels would not be able to recur, as it is the case now. Moreover, it is probably the only issue that can still be negotiated even with the Turkish research vessel in operation.

In an era of mutual tensions, the Greens in Turkey and Greece opted to build bridges instead. On 15 August 2020, the Greek PRASINOI/Greens published a [joint statement](#) with the Yeşiller Meclisi Turkish Greens for a definitive end to all new hydrocarbon exploration and extraction projects in the Eastern Mediterranean, starting with Greece and Turkey.

Marine ecosystems are a global commons in need of protection. A series of Green proposals, which account for the climate crisis and the European commitment to zero net emissions, include opposition to three points: any escalation of the conflict, a joint Greek-Turkish extraction project, and any unilateral concession of exclusive economic zone space. Ideally, Greece and Turkey would mutually drop their exclusive economic zone claims. If this proves unrealistic, they should seek an agreement on zero extractions, even after the final exclusive economic zone demarcation. In case of no agreement, Greece should adopt it unilaterally for its entire national space and maritime zones, following the examples of France, Spain and Portugal.

Security by diplomacy, not militarisation

The long-standing Greek-Turkish disputes can easily be exploited for renewed conflict and tension. It is now urgent to have them settled by diplomatic means, in a context of peace building and compliance to international law (which now also includes the UN international maritime law). Having maritime zones delimited may also include settling disputes over their starting points: Greece will have to make its final decision whether (and where) to extend its territorial waters beyond the current six-miles width, possibly building on an unratified 2004 staff-level

agreement with Turkey for partial extension and alignment with Greek national airspace, while leaving open a corridor of international waters in the middle of the Aegean. Turkish claims about “unspecified sovereignty” islands might also need to be examined, exclusively on their legal basis, so that they stop being exploited by nationalism.

EU mediation has to ensure solutions compatible with the European acquis and international legitimacy. Issues that fail to be agreed upon should be referred to the International Court of Justice in the Hague. As long as Turkey keeps behaving contrary to the European acquis, its candidacy for EU membership should remain frozen, but still open as an incentive for a possible turn in policy in the future.

In times of ecological crisis and pandemic, security can no longer be expressed only, nor mainly, in military terms.

The main obstacle to any plans for an international conference on the Eastern Mediterranean, is currently Turkey’s non-recognition of Cyprus. There is therefore an urgent need for a sustainable settlement in Cyprus as well, based on the 2017 UN framework for a Bi-Zonal Bicomunal Federation excluding any unilateral military intervention “rights”, even by guarantor countries.

To fight the climate crisis, a comprehensive green plan is needed for the entire Eastern Mediterranean region that will see all fossil fuels phased out. A starting point would be the permanent abandonment of new gas and oil exploration and drilling projects. The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum must be reoriented towards enhancing environmental safety and planning for an eventual fossil fuel phase-out. Turkey should also be invited, under the new orientation. The EU can contribute to peace and stability – and contain Turkish military unilateralism – by refraining from trapping Greece into a new arms race as this threatens to renew bankruptcy in a country already in debt. In times of ecological crisis and pandemic, security can no longer be expressed only, nor mainly, in military terms.



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