



The Paris-Athens-Ankara triangle: A game for influence in the Eastern Mediterranean

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Summary

- Under President Erdogan, Turkey has expanded its regional geopolitical aspirations through the quest for energy resources and the projection of military influence from North Africa through the Horn of Africa to the Persian Gulf.
- As the United States remain ambivalent about their role in the MENA region and NATO stays neutral, France aims to claim a more active role. However, France seems to lack the political resolve to do so while the EU remains fragmented in its stance and Germany prefers to cajole Turkey.
- Greece is trying to enhance its strategic partnership with France while forging a coalition of interests with countries such as Egypt and the UAE, both of which maintain close relations with Paris.
- Leveraging US interests with its own is another crucial goal for Athens.
- Athens runs the risk of finding itself in the middle of a Franco-Turkish confrontation in the Eastern Mediterranean. If Greece wants an influential role in this triangle, it needs to prove that it is a powerful player in the region, both militarily and diplomatically. That way France, Germany and the EU will take Greece's interests more seriously.
- Diplomatically, Athens should strive to create a nexus of regional cooperation schemes by expanding the current trilateral East Med formats: e.g., by creating an East Med Green Forum to promote sustainability and environmental issues (EU and Gulf states could be members). Athens should also work for an enhanced EU Mediterranean policy as part of a revamped EU foreign policy.
- Militarily, Athens needs to work on its defense capabilities through an advanced military infrastructure and smart procurements, while aiming to become a regional defense hub in areas such as the naval and aerospace industries.

Introduction

“The two main flashpoints which highlight the “new Mediterranean geopolitics” are Libya and Syria. [...] Turkey aims to portray itself as a maritime power which can project power not only in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean but also in the Central Mediterranean.”

The Mediterranean Sea could be characterized as one of the most volatile regional theaters in current geopolitics. Since the Arab Spring in 2011, a string of conflicts from Tunisia to Syria have exacerbated pre-existing social, economic, and political differences, while feeding geostrategic aspirations. As Europe faced a series of crises between 2010 and 2018, more specifically the euro and migration crises, and the United States during the Obama administration pivoted their interests towards Asia, third countries took advantage of the geopolitical vacuum created by asserting their influence.¹ The two main flashpoints which highlight the “new Mediterranean geopolitics” are Libya and Syria. It is also clear today that Turkey aims to portray itself as a maritime power which, under the “Mavi Vatan” (Blue Homeland) doctrine, can project power not only in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean but also in the Central Mediterranean.²

Ankara’s aspirations have led to direct political, diplomatic, and possibly military confrontation with Paris. Due to its colonial past which saw France rule an area stretching from North Africa to the Eastern Mediterranean, France views this region as an important element of its national defense and security strategy, as a springboard for political influence but also as a platform for economic influence. The latter element becomes even more evident as French energy companies like Total want a piece of the oil pie coming from post-conflict Libya.

In the meantime, Ankara’s neo-imperial goals have raised tensions with Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkish research and drilling vessels have repeatedly crossed into areas claimed by both EU countries as belonging in their continental shelves and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). These incursions challenge Greek and Cypriot sovereignty rights or even their sovereignty. Athens and Nicosia have turned to Paris (and secondarily Washington) to help them balance against Ankara’s coercive diplomacy. However, Athens and Nicosia run the danger of finding themselves entangled in a zero-sum game between France and Turkey. The challenge for Athens as the EU country with the biggest leverage in the region is to find the right balance between forging a diplomatic nexus to contain Ankara’s goals while enhancing swiftly and efficiently its military capabilities in case Turkey decides to use force to advance its claims.

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The view from Paris

France’s Mediterranean policy is based on national interests and realism. France regards itself as a first-class power with several advantages in the region.³ It is the only Mediterranean country that is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and maintains the strongest armed forces of all countries in the region. Despite the fact that over the past few years Paris has prioritized the deployment of military forces in Africa with a view mainly to engage in counterterrorism operations, French forces are still deployed at various points in the Eastern Mediterranean. France also

¹ Marc Pierini, “New Power Struggles in the Mediterranean”, Carnegie Europe, July 30, 2020. Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/07/30/new-power-struggles-in-mediterranean-pub-82403>.

² For further details on the “Blue Homeland” doctrine see the exclusive interview of Admiral (ret.) Cem Gurdeniz in Angelos Athanasopoulos, “The Turkish Plan”, To Vima, June 5, 2020.

³ Didier Billion, “France’s Mediterranean Policies: Ambitious initiatives but lack of momentum?”, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, June 2020. Available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/16305.pdf>.

“Since President Emmanuel Macron came into office, France has gradually sought a return to its circle of influence in the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region[...] France will always identify as ‘a Mediterranean power’.”

participates in EU and NATO operations such as the EU's “Irimi” operation to implement UN Security Council resolutions to ensure compliance with the arms embargo in Libya, and NATO's “Sea Guardian” operation. Neither should we underestimate the soft power exercised by Paris due to its historical colonial presence in the region (Magreb and Sahel).

Since President Emmanuel Macron came into office, France has gradually sought a return to its circle of influence in the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This region geographically starts in the Western Mediterranean and the Maghreb and ends in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. As President Macron said in his comments after a summit with Chancellor Angela Merkel last August, France will always identify as “a Mediterranean power”. Paris expresses an ambition not to let Russia and China fill the vacuum allegedly left by Washington's reduced presence. President Macron's recent visits to Lebanon (only two days after the devastating explosion in the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020) and Iraq a few days later confirm French power ambitions in the area.⁴ Under President Macron, Paris also appears more willing to wield power in the region to achieve its goals. In this context, Macron seems to follow the ambition of one of his predecessors, Nicolas Sarkozy who proposed the creation of a Mediterranean Union – an idea which did not materialize due to strong resistance from other EU member states (especially Germany) and a lack of monetary resources .

Increased French interest in the Eastern Mediterranean

“Three main issues should be highlighted in the strategic narrative France is pushing today in the Mediterranean (mainly in the Eastern Med): refugees, energy and Turkey.”

Three main issues should be highlighted in the strategic narrative France is pushing today in the Mediterranean (mainly in the Eastern Med): refugees, energy and Turkey. The three issue areas correlate to three specific geographical areas of the Mediterranean: a) Libya and Africa, b) Eastern Mediterranean and Horn of Africa, c) Levant and the Middle East/Gulf.

Ankara's role in all three is feeding a brewing Franco-Turkish rivalry⁵ which affects EU–Turkish relations, NATO–Turkish relations and, lastly, Greece's policies in the region. It should be noted that the Mediterranean geopolitical chessboard, which stretches from North Africa to the Levant, was once an area of competing French and Ottoman imperial control.

The latest spat between Paris and Ankara came on 24 October. Recep Tayyip Erdogan decided to take umbrage with comments made by Emmanuel Macron about Islam. The French President recently announced a controversial campaign to change the practice of the faith within the country. He warned that some Muslims in France were propagating beliefs which deviate from the values of the Republic. This effort assumed greater urgency since the brutal beheading of a schoolteacher who had shown to his students caricatures of the Prophet Mohammad. Erdogan, who frequently seizes the opportunity to appear as the leader of the Muslim world and to decry Western hypocrisy, directly attacked Macron's mental health and later urged Muslims to boycott French goods. Although both leaders are facing problems in their doorsteps and this latest spat could serve their political objectives at home, the risk of further escalation in EU-Turkey

⁴ Steven A. Cook, “Macron wants to be a Middle Eastern Superpower”, Foreign Policy, September 15, 2020. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/15/macron-france-lebanon-turkey-middle-eastern-superpower/>. See also Michel Duclos, “Macron in Beirut and Baghdad: A New French Approach to the Middle East?”, September 11, 2020. Available at: <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/macron-beirut-and-baghdad-new-french-approach-middle-east> .

⁵ Henri J. Barkey, “France vs Turkey: A Showdown in the Mediterranean is Brewing”, National Interest, September 15, 2020. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/france-vs-turkey-showdown-mediterranean-brewing-169048> .

relations and in the Eastern Mediterranean is obvious, especially if Paris pushes hard for hard EU sanctions against Ankara by the end of 2020.

“Ankara has been cultivating stronger ties throughout the continent - stretching from the “soft underbelly” of France’s “imperial presence” in the Sahel. Also, French allies such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates are concerned about rising Turkish influence in the Horn of Africa (especially in Somalia).”

Flashpoint Libya

The Libyan crisis presented Paris with a series of political challenges. In the chaotic years following Muammar al-Qaddafi’s downfall and especially since 2015, France has supported General Halifa Haftar in the Libyan civil conflict. He was considered an essential actor in removing jihadist groups and militias, which were cooperating with the General Accord Government (GNA) of Fayez al-Sarraj in Tripoli, which is recognized by the United Nations. Paris worked closely with Cairo and Abu Dhabi to aide General Haftar. However, this stance positioned Paris in a direct line of confrontation with Ankara,⁶ since it is a major supporter of the GNA especially since 2019. Ankara has provided weapons (mainly drones) and military experts that helped al-Sarraj turn the tide of the civil war in his favor. During the 10 June 2020 NATO “Sea Guardian” exercise, France and Turkey also engaged in a game of brinkmanship when a maritime incident between military vessels of the two countries increased tensions within NATO. Paris requested a NATO investigation into the incident, but the ruling was not in France’s favor.⁷

It is not only the possibility of a permanent Turkish military footprint in Libya which concerns France, but also the refugee problem and oil and gas rights. Chaos in the North African country has allowed human smuggling networks to send thousands of refugees to Europe. Furthermore, Paris does not want to allow Turkish companies to receive exclusive rights in the oil and gas sector in post-conflict Libya, while it observes with great unease Turkey’s actions in North Africa. Paris has also said that the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed on 27 November 2019 between GNA and Turkey on the delimitation of maritime zones is null and void, as it ignores crucial clauses of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In parallel, Ankara has been cultivating stronger ties throughout the continent – stretching from the “soft underbelly” of France’s “imperial presence” in the Sahel (e.g., Mali and Niger). Also, French allies such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are concerned about rising Turkish influence in the Horn of Africa (especially in Somalia).⁸

“France is concerned with the destabilizing role of Turkey in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. The continuation of conflict in these areas could spark a new refugee crisis[...] It is mainly energy and power politics which feed the Franco-Turkish rivalry.”

Eastern Mediterranean: Causes for concern

However, it is the Eastern Mediterranean which presents the biggest concern for French policymakers, as events there could easily turn into a zero-sum game. France has long been skeptical of Turkey’s determination to join the EU but now believes that Ankara has embarked in a neo-imperialist policy which threatens not only other EU member states such as Greece and Cyprus but also the coherence of NATO. France is concerned with the destabilizing role of Turkey in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. The continuation of conflict in these areas could spark a new refugee crisis which Macron would like to avoid ahead of the French presidential elections in 2022. It is mainly energy and power politics which feed the Franco-Turkish rivalry, more so than a new influx of refugees. Like in Libya, Total is also operating, jointly with Italy’s Eni, in gas and oil exploration activities in the Cypriot EEZ. Turkey’s assertive approach in the Eastern Mediterranean, where it repeatedly

⁶ Armin Arefi, “France – Turquie, les raisons d’ un clash”, Le Point, 16 Juillet, 2020.

⁷ Jean-Pierre Stroobants, “Les provocations turques en Mediterranee embarrassent une OTAN impuissante”, Le Monde, 1 Septembre 2020. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/09/01/les-provocations-turques-en-mediterranee-embarrassent-une-otan-impuissante_6050533_3210.html .

⁸ For an interesting review of the widening geopolitical competition in the Horn of Arica see “Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa’s Horn: Lessening the Impact”, International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No 206, 19 September 2019.

“President Macron spoke about the need for a “Pax Mediterranea” and has said on numerous occasions that Ankara aims to use its naval strength to impose a new order in the Eastern Mediterranean. It also appears that France wants to position itself as forging a more unified EU foreign policy based on ‘strategic autonomy’.”

sends its seismic research vessel “Oruc Reis” and its drilling platform “Yavuz” in areas where Greece has claims to the continental shelf and Cyprus claims its EEZ sovereign rights, threatens not only friendly countries but also French commercial interests. It should also be noted that France has expressed a strong interest in becoming a permanent member of the newly established, Cairo-based, East Med Gas Forum (EMGF) which includes Egypt, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority –but does not include Turkey.

Paris has reacted to Ankara’s coercive tactics by upgrading its military presence in the region, by sending military vessels and aircraft, and by participating in joint drills with Greece and Cyprus. Additionally, it has agreed to sell 18 Rafale aircraft to Athens and talks are ongoing for the signing of a bilateral Strategic Cooperation Agreement and even for the sale of Belh@rra frigates to the Hellenic Navy.⁹ In parallel, Paris is trying to convince its EU partners that they should start thinking more seriously about the possibility of imposing serious sanctions against Ankara if it does not change its destabilizing behavior.

The question remains as to what exactly France wants to do in the Mediterranean. After September’s “Med7” meeting in Corsica (France, Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Malta, Spain, and Portugal participated), President Macron spoke about the need for a “Pax Mediterranea”¹⁰ and has said on numerous occasions that Ankara aims to use its naval strength to impose a new order in the Eastern Mediterranean. It also appears that France wants to position itself as forging a more unified EU foreign policy based on “strategic autonomy”. According to the French, the EU should start projecting power outside of its borders to its broader neighborhood, and it cannot let countries like Turkey – but also Russia and China – increase their sphere of influence. However, Macron appears alone in this endeavor as most EU member states are currently focusing on battling COVID-19 and its economic impact. Chancellor Merkel still prefers to engage Turkey and views French aspirations with a grain of salt.

The view from Ankara

“[President Erdogan] is using an assertive foreign policy as a tool to cover-up domestic political weaknesses, especially in the field of economic policy.”

Recep Tayyip Erdogan's increasingly assertive, even revisionist policy in the Eastern Mediterranean stems from a convergence of factors. They include the realization of ambitious goals, such as the emergence of Turkey as a dominant power in the wider Middle East, the reduction of its energy dependence, as huge volumes of oil and gas are needed for the development of the Turkish economy, and the strong growth of the Turkish defense industry, to make it less dependent on buying arms from third countries. It is important to note that Ankara's foreign policy choices are significantly influenced by the concentration of all political power in the hands of President Erdogan and his need to serve his political ambitions. He is using an assertive foreign policy as a tool to cover-up domestic political weaknesses, especially in the field of economic policy. These cracks in the economy emerged during the last three years and especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic as the “Achilles heel” for his government.

Currently, Turkey has military deployments in Iraq, Syria and Libya, and is also present in other countries like Qatar and Somalia under different arrangements. This could be

⁹ Angelos Athanasopoulos, “How Greece turned from the Belh@rra to the Rafales?”, To Vima, 20 September 2020. Available at: https://www.tovima.gr/printed_post/pos-egine-i-strofi-apo-tis-belhrra-sta-rafale/.

¹⁰ See President Macron’s relevant comments after the Med7 Conference in Corsica: <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-15991-fr.pdf>.

“Some analysts insist that the dispatch of Turkish research vessels in the Eastern Mediterranean, [...] is motivated by economic considerations, both for domestic and external reasons.”

“Erdogan’s repeated statements about the Treaty of Lausanne are indicative of his thinking that in 1923 Turkey was confined to its current borders and a century later, in 2023, under his rule, Turkey should be “liberated” and act as a regional power.”

described as a break with the recent past, as the Turkish military has been usually averse in undertaking risky endeavors in foreign territories. The Turkish Armed Forces have primarily been preoccupied with operations against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in southeastern Turkey. Since the coup attempt in 2016, Turkey has staged three military incursions in Syria (in August 2016, January 2018 and October 2019) mainly to counter the advance of YPG, the Syrian affiliate of the PKK.

Ankara however, with its “Blue Homeland” doctrine is increasing its influence in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean and backing it up with critical military force to help it achieve its energy goals. During the last 18 months, Turkey has repeatedly dispatched its seismic exploration vessels “Barbaros” and “Oruc Reis” in Cypriot and lately (in August and October 2020) in Greek continental and EEZ areas, while its drilling platforms (namely “Yavuz” and “Fatih”) are almost permanently violating Cyprus’ sovereign rights in the Eastern Mediterranean. The latest (Oct 2020) seismic research activities of the “Oruc Reis” are being conducted in maritime areas very close to Kastellorizo,¹¹ and a string of small islands under Greek sovereignty. These movements have alarmed the EU and NATO as they could spark a fire between the two longstanding regional rivals, Greece and Turkey. A diplomatic mediation initiative was undertaken by Germany with mixed results, while NATO proposed a de-escalation of conflict mechanism with limited success. However, Ankara seems undeterred by the threat of possible EU sanctions and has not hesitated even to break its commitments promised during the German mediation efforts.¹²

Turkish motivations in the Mediterranean

Some analysts insist that the dispatch of Turkish research vessels in the Eastern Mediterranean, escorted by an armada of military vessels, is motivated by economic considerations, both for domestic and external reasons. Actually, this is a rather simplistic approach to a more complex situation. Erdogan’s repeated statements about the Treaty of Lausanne are indicative of his thinking that in 1923 Turkey was confined to its current borders and a century later, in 2023, under his rule, Turkey should be “liberated” and act as a regional power.¹³ The recent unilateral moves into areas where both Greece and Cyprus claim sovereign rights should be viewed alongside the MoU with the GNA in Tripoli that was signed in 2019 marking the delimitation of maritime zones. Ankara aims to neutralize Greece’s sovereign rights in a vast maritime area south of Crete and derail future construction of the technically and financially ambitious East Med gas pipeline from Israel to Italy. –Luckily, Turkey’s efforts appear to have the opposite results so far. After 15 years of negotiations, Greece managed to conclude a partial delimitation agreement with Egypt concerning their EEZs.¹⁴ The Cairo based EMGF (of which Turkey is not a member) recently adopted its Charter, officially becoming an international organization, in which an “informal alliance” of countries such as Egypt,

¹¹ Since last July, Ankara has proceeded with the issuance of a series of NAVTEX (navigational telex messages) for oil & gas exploration activities in the Eastern Mediterranean and specifically in areas Turkey unilaterally claims to be under their jurisdiction. The ones issued in September and October 2020 covered an area just outside Greek territorial waters, near Kastellorizo.

¹² See the European Council Conclusions, 2 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45910/021020-euco-final-conclusions.pdf>. On Germany’s mediation efforts, see Angelos Athanasopoulos, “The Berlin Protocols: How Erdogan ‘torpedoed’ the talks with Athens”, To Vima, 18 October 2020. Available at: https://www.tovima.gr/printed_post/pos-o-ernotogan-torpile-crtis-synomilies-me-tin-athina/.

¹³ Marc Champion, “Turkey’s Muscle Flexing in the Med Isn’t Just About Gas”, Bloomberg, 7 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-07/turkey-s-muscle-flexing-in-the-med-isn-t-just-about-gas>.

¹⁴ Gallia Lindenstrauss and Ofir Winter, “A Red Line for the Blue Homeland: The Maritime Border Demarcation Agreement between Greece and Egypt”, INSS Insight 1373, 25 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/egypt-greece-agreement/>.

Greece, Cyprus, UAE and France are working in concert to contain Turkish assertiveness.

Who will stand up against Ankara's geopolitical ambitions?

As the EU seems ambivalent in adopting a unified stance towards Turkey, mainly because Berlin prefers a strategy of appeasement, France appears as the only European country willing to stand up against Ankara. Recently, Paris announced that it will recall its ambassador to Ankara after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan suggested Emmanuel Macron, his French counterpart, needed mental health treatment. Ankara has been incensed by a campaign championed by Macron to protect France's secular values against radical Islam, while Erdogan wants to seize an opportunity and prove his credentials as a leader of the Muslim world.

It is true that Paris and Ankara could be heading towards a geopolitical standoff not only in the Eastern Mediterranean but also in Africa. The Franco – Turkish spat is also evident on issues concerning Islam. Ankara's support to the GNA could have far-reaching consequences for France, Egypt and Greece. Although Turkey helped Tripoli alter the balance of power on the ground, we also need to gauge the possible consequences of a more permanent presence of Turkish forces in Libya. Such plans include a naval base in Misrata and an aerial base in al-Watiyah. Additionally, Ankara and the GNA recently signed an agreement to settle any outstanding issues from the Gaddafi era concerning projects of Turkish companies.

However, it would be a grave mistake to believe that Turkey's inroads in Africa are only limited to Libya. Since 2010, Ankara has initiated a sustained strategy to expand its political, economic, and military footprint in Africa, causing many headaches to France, Egypt and the UAE. Today, Turkey has more than 40 embassies and 40 business councils on the African continent, while prior to Covid-19, Turkish Airlines the national carrier connected many African countries to Istanbul and other Turkish cities.¹⁵ President Erdogan and other high level Turkish officials have paid visits to North African countries like Algeria and Tunisia but also to countries such as Gambia and Senegal, which also belong to the French "sphere of influence" in Africa. It should also be noted that Algeria, a crucial target of the Turkish "charm offensive" borders Niger (with which Turkey recently signed military and economic cooperation agreements); Mali, where Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu paid a visit on 10 September 2020, less than a month after a military coup; and Mauritania where Paris is conducting critical counterterrorism operations and characterizes this area as its African "near abroad".¹⁶ As far as East Africa is concerned, Turkey's presence in Somalia, where it operates a military training base in Mogadishu, and its latest rapprochement with Ethiopia have caused serious concerns to Egypt and the UAE – both important partners of France.

Over the years, Turkey has cultivated a very close economic partnership with Italy. Since 2019, Yilport Holding one of the largest Turkish port and container operators is managing operations in the pivotal Italian port of Taranto. Rome is also a keyplayer in the Central Mediterranean basin and lately seems willing to challenge Paris' dominance in Africa. Political and military developments in Libya have afforded Italy and Turkey a platform to expand their economic cooperation to Tunisia, Malta, and other countries in North

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¹⁵ Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey's militarized Africa opening fuels influence wars", Al Monitor, 31 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/08/turkey-africa-opening-fuels-cloud-wars-libya-somalia-niger.html>.

¹⁶ For a very interesting analysis of the Franco – Turkish rivalry in Africa see Michael Tanchum, "Turkey Advances in Africa against Franco-Emirati-Egyptian Entente", Turkey Analyst, 25 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/646-turkey-advances-in-africa-against-franco-emirati-egyptian-entente.html>.

Africa, thus creating a wider connectivity nexus in the Afro-Mediterranean region.¹⁷

The view from Athens

The current standoff with Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean and Ankara's neo-imperialist tendencies are posing a very difficult dilemma for Athens – on two fronts. The first concerns the balance Greece must and should keep between military preparation against longstanding rival Turkey and maintaining economic development by boosting investment regardless of the economic downturn due to the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the primary goals of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis who was elected almost one and a half years ago is the stabilization of the Greek economy after almost a decade of severe economic recession due to the implementation of EU and IMF austerity measures. The second dilemma is that Greece is in danger of finding itself trapped in a power struggle in the Mediterranean and more specifically in the midst of Franco-Turkish rivalry. In this scenario, Athens will not only have to come face-to-face with Turkey's claims, but could also run the danger of becoming a "regional satellite" of France – of which it has nothing to gain. Furthermore, Greece could also find itself in an arms race spiral which will further hamper its economic development.

“Today, the nature of the Greek-Turkish rivalry has changed compared to the recent past. Greece is trying to come out of a decade-long and crippling economic crisis by attracting overseas investment and modernizing archaic state structures. While on the other hand, Turkey has become a revisionist and neo-imperialist state with expansionist goals.”

Standoff between neighbors

Greece should not be surprised by the current Turkish muscle flexing in the Eastern Mediterranean and its designs upon the oil fields discovered there. Athens and Ankara have been engaged in a tense standoff – with periodical ups and downs – for decades already when it comes to exploiting oil and gas deposits in the continental shelf. An especially tense period was 1973 when Greece started exploring for oil in the northeastern Aegean Sea.

The list of differences and disputes is long, involving complex technical issues around the delimitation of the continental shelf and the simpler issue of the EEZ. Today, however, the nature of the Greek-Turkish rivalry has changed compared to the recent past. Greece is trying to come out of a decade-long and crippling economic crisis by attracting overseas investment and modernizing archaic state structures. While on the other hand, Turkey has become a revisionist and neo-imperialist state with expansionist goals. Its leader is questioning the mere foundations of the secularist modern Turkish Republic, founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923. President Erdogan is governing with a mix of political Islam and nationalism with his eyes on the centenary of the foundation of post-Ottoman Turkey in 2023.

The discovery of energy reserves in the Aegean Sea almost 50 years ago has set off a modern Greco-Turkish regional rivalry. Now however, the stakes are higher as oil and gas reserves have been found throughout the Eastern Mediterranean rather than only in the Aegean. With the new reserves come many more players, some with conflicting or even ambivalent views and aims.

It is not only energy reserves which affect Greece's policies vis-à-vis Turkey. In order to flex military muscle in the Eastern Mediterranean, Athens needs better and more modern military capabilities. This is an area in which Greece is lagging far behind and the

¹⁷ On Italian–Turkish cooperation see Michael Tanchum, “Italy and Turkey’s Europe-to-Africa Commercial Corridor: Rome and Ankara’s Geopolitical Symbiosis is Creating a New Mediterranean Strategic Paradigm”, Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES), Fokus 10/2020, 25 August 2020.

“Athens needs better and more modern military capabilities. This is an area in which Greece is lagging far behind and the recent economic crisis made things even worse. Turkey in the meantime has created a powerful domestic defense industry whereas Greece remains totally dependent on arms imports.”

recent economic crisis made things even worse. Turkey in the meantime has created a powerful domestic defense industry whereas Greece remains totally dependent on arms imports. Furthermore, the Cyprus issue is a potentially complicating factor. Certain officials in Athens believe that the solution of the Cyprus issue could be detached from the core of Greco-Turkish tensions. However, the nature of the power game in the Eastern Mediterranean does not afford this luxury to Athens. The regional geostrategic landscape cannot be compartmentalized. Under the “Blue Homeland” doctrine, Ankara views Greece and Cyprus, together, as obstacles to the realization of its strategy for regional dominance. In this context, Greece should remain actively engaged in solving the Cyprus issue, even more so as Turkey seems to have embarked on a two-state solution (some officials say even a Crimea-like referendum-cum-annexation) to the island’s political problem.

Countering Turkish aggressiveness

Historically, Greece has used two instruments to counter Turkish assertive policies. First, Athens dramatically increased military spending especially after critical incidents which threatened its sovereignty such as the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and the Turkish incursion of Imia in 1996 (a rocky outpost which is part of Greek territory). Secondly, the guarantees that membership in NATO and the EU offered do not seem to be credible anymore. They were constants as long as Turkey was considered a predictable ally wishing to become a member of the EU. Lately, Turkey is toying with NATO’s solidarity by cultivating close relations with Russia by working together in Syria and Libya and acquiring the Russian S400 antimissile system. As far as the EU is concerned, government policy circles in Ankara view the EU as a regional organization in decline and they prefer a transactional diplomacy with its most important members, especially Germany, Italy and Spain. In the meantime, Athens has cultivated its historically close relations with the United States and cultivated relations with France. Paris has traditionally sided with Athens since 1974 when it provided critical military aid to the government of Constantinos Karamanlis. Greece agreed to purchase 18 new Rafale F3 fighter aircraft from France and delivery will begin in 2021. Paris is also interested in selling high-end technology frigates to the Hellenic Navy.

In the Balkans, Greece has mainly used its soft power and “light” geopolitical tools, such as energy and strategic alliances, to expand its geostrategic footprint. The inclusion of its northern neighbors into European and Trans-Atlantic institutions has been a very successful strategy. However, the same approach failed with Turkey when the accession process in the 1990s and 2000s fell apart. The ambivalence of certain EU member states (such as France, Germany, the Netherlands and Austria) was not helpful as critical momentum was lost, while since 2013 Ankara has become increasingly Eurosceptic.¹⁸

These developments have led Greece to follow a hard power strategy in the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. One based on closer cooperation with France, the US and Middle East countries who share the view that stability is “the game in town” (i.e., Israel, Egypt, Cyprus, the UAE Bahrain and Oman). This common understanding has led to varying forms of cooperation on energy and defense policies, mainly through forms of triangular diplomacy, such as Greece–Cyprus–Israel or the Greece–Cyprus–Egypt trilateral schemes, or the Cairo-based EMGF. These formats exclude Turkey who is currently considered “the great disruptor” in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, Greece cannot exclusively count on the current equation of regional cooperation and its current military capabilities to counter Turkish revisionism and neo-imperial tendencies. A more robust

¹⁸ Erdogan believed that the Gezi Park protests that same year consisted a threat to his authority. This perception led him to an authoritarian shift against rule of law and freedom of press which deepened the existing rift with the EU.

and innovative policy is needed if Athens wants to safeguard its rights, promote its interests and claim a more visible role as a middle rank regional power.

The Way Forward

“The polemics between Greece and Turkey are neither new nor will they dissipate or vanish anytime soon. The same applies to the current Franco-Turkish rivalry for influence and dominance in the Mediterranean Sea and North Africa. The stakes are high for all three countries forming this triangle. It must also be said that the international and regional order has dramatically changed in the past few years.”

The polemics between Greece and Turkey are neither new nor will they dissipate or vanish anytime soon. The same applies to the current Franco-Turkish rivalry for influence and dominance in the Mediterranean Sea and North Africa. The stakes are high for all three countries forming this triangle. It must also be said that the international and regional order has dramatically changed in the past few years. During the Cold War, the balance in the Eastern Mediterranean was secured by the balance of power between the two superpowers. In the post-Cold War era the preeminence of the US secured the balance in the Eastern Mediterranean. This however is no longer the case. Additionally, during the last 20 years Greece crafted a strategy based on EU–Turkish rapprochement, while Ankara’s calculus today points to a strategic rebalancing towards a more independent foreign and security policy. This shift is clearly defined by President Erdogan’s view that “the world is bigger than five,” meaning that power does not belong only to the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Forging the way with France

France is probably the only EU member-state which has recognized the urgent need to rethink the foundation of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Paris has expressed similar ambitions in the past, especially in the first years after the end of the Cold War, but Washington’s strong policy in preserving NATO as the pillar of European security prevented any structural changes in European security architecture. However, under the Trump Presidency, there have been signs of an increasingly ambivalent stance by the US as far as commitment to NATO is concerned.

The uncertainty of the future of NATO, Turkey’s decision to procure the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile system, the incident against a French military vessel participating in NATO’s “Sea Guardian” operation in the Central Mediterranean in June 2020, have all fueled France’s disenchantment with the Alliance. This was expressed by President Macron’s “brain dead” characterization of NATO.¹⁹ Most recently Paris and Ankara have locked horns on French legislation on Islam, as Erdogan has accused President Macron of being offensive to the Muslims.

In its effort to counter Turkey’s revisionist policies, Greece has turned to France for political and military support. Paris has reciprocated both because it shares Greek concerns and due to its own uneasiness with Turkish expansionist policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria, Libya and more generally in Africa. However, France seems to promote a more forceful stance against Turkey than the rest of the EU, as became evident in the “Joint Declaration” of the Med7 meeting,²⁰ which took place in Corsica on September 10. This forceful stance runs the risk of bringing Athens closer to military conflict with Ankara in the Eastern Mediterranean without enough guarantees of assistance from the French, EU, NATO or even the US. In this context, Athens should

¹⁹ “Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain dead”, Economist, 7 November 2019.

²⁰ Ajaccio Declaration after the 7th Summit of the Southern EU countries (MED7), 10 September 2020. Available at:

<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/europe/news/article/ajaccio-declaration-after-the-7th-summit-of-the-southern-eu-countries-med7-10> .

avoid being dragged into a direct military confrontation with Turkey by siding with a third country, unless specific bilateral security guarantees in the form of a mutual assistance clause are offered. Indeed, as the negotiations with France on a strategic partnership are concerned, such guarantees can never be ironclad and will not alleviate Greece's security concerns.

The pillars of Greece's Mediterranean strategy

“Three areas deserve special attention. First, Greece should use geography to its advantage.”

A renewed Greek strategy should focus on two main pillars. First, Athens should strive on an ambitious military modernization program, which does not simply rest on new defense procurements but also includes the creation of a domestic defense industrial base. Second, Greece must try to expand and deepen the regional cooperation architecture by creating a dense strategic nexus to counter Ankara's ambitions. In parallel, Athens should strive for a fundamental rethinking of its engagement strategy with Turkey, realizing that the current framework of the accession process is dead, and a different kind of engagement is thus needed. Assuming such a framework is feasible with Ankara's assertive policies.

As far as the first pillar is concerned, Greece does not have the luxury to spend scarce resources in areas which do not add any comparative advantage to the country's defense. Three areas deserve special attention. **First**, Greece should use geography to its advantage. In the case of the Eastern Mediterranean, this means that Athens should take full advantage of Crete as its most critical geographical asset. Plans have already been initiated for the construction of a second fleet base on the island while the Hellenic Navy also possesses important infrastructure in the south and east of the island. This second fleet base should be fully equipped and able to host at least 50% of the fleet's vessels and especially submarines. It should also have repair and maintenance capacities.

“Second, Greece should invest in a smart navy modernization program combined with the revival of the local shipyards' industry.”

Second, Greece should invest in a smart navy modernization program combined with the revival of the local shipyards' industry. The country needs to preserve its advantage at sea, especially by investing in submarines, while the procurement of four new surface vessels is an absolute priority. In parallel, the revival of three shipyards in Syros, Elefsina and Skaramangas will also boost the local economy and employment. The same goal should be pursued concerning the Hellenic Aerospace Industry (HAI) which could, if modernized, become a regional maintenance hub for the Air Forces of neighboring states and of Middle Eastern countries.

“Third, Greece must invest in critical technologies and in cyberwarfare.”

Third, Greece must invest in critical technologies and in cyberwarfare. Athens will never be able to match Turkey's size and industrial base, and thus must think smart in order to achieve multiple goals with few resources. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), drones and cyber capabilities form a triad which could offer crucial advantages to Greece or counter Ankara's advantages. Countries such as France (but also Israel and the US) can participate in high tech joint ventures and multilateral cooperation schemes could also serve as a deterrent towards Turkey.

The second pillar of forming a dense strategic nexus of stronger regional cooperation is not something new. During the last few years, Greece realized that it shares the same perceptions about regional stability with like-minded countries such as Israel, Cyprus, Egypt and even the UAE. It is suggested that the trilateral nexus schemes should be further expanded both to include more countries from the region but also states like France, the UAE, and the US. Greece must stop thinking passively and take the initiative. The EMGF and the “3+1” format (Greece–Israel–Cyprus + United States) offer a very useful guide on how Athens should move. Greece should aim to create an EMGF-like

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regional organization on green energy as an extension of its ambitious goals for “greening” the country’s economy. An EMGF II, possibly named East Med Green Forum, could promote climate sustainability and promote the idea of a fossil fuel-free Eastern Mediterranean. Additionally, the EU has placed its Green Agenda very high on its list of policy priorities for the next few decades. Furthermore, more “3+1” formats could be feasible in many areas such as cooperation in disasters, in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic or in cyber threats. Possible examples could be a “3+1” format among Greece–Egypt–Cyprus–UAE or among Greece–Egypt–Cyprus–France (which could focus especially on military cooperation) or a Greece–Israel–Cyprus–UAE scheme.

Lastly, Greece must drop its illusions and work towards a different approach into EU–Turkey relations or even NATO–Turkey relations. This is an area where Athens and Paris can work together as both countries believe that the power of NATO and its guarantees of protection may be a thing of the past. A fundamental rethinking of Greece’s strategic policies towards Turkey should try to combine the idea of a more transactional character in EU–Turkey relations, with moves towards enhancing the EU’s strategic autonomy. The first leg of such a strategy should be a clever examination of a modernization upgrade to the EU–Turkey Customs Union in order to use it both as a leverage for a positive agenda and as a containment tool. In parallel, Athens must use all its diplomatic might to convince other Mediterranean EU member states, such as Italy and Spain, of Turkey’s assertive policies and convince them to work with France in creating a more inclusive Mediterranean strategy as part of EU’s strategic autonomy. Greece should use its role in the new “Mediterranean geopolitical geometry” to act as a bridge to countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, in the Gulf and with Israel to include them in a revamped neighborhood policy. A possible example could be the initiation of a NATO-style Mediterranean Dialogue Forum. Additionally, if Athens succeeds in reforming and modernizing its military capabilities, it will represent the full power of the EU backed by its regional partners and partnerships and will act as a balance in this volatile region.

Conclusions

The current geopolitical situation in the Mediterranean has changed significantly compared to a few years ago. The United States has not definitively pulled out, but it appears increasingly ambivalent to engage substantially in deterring or settling any emerging problems. In this vacuum, an increasingly assertive and revisionist Turkey seeks to expand its influence through the application of the “Blue Homeland” doctrine with special emphasis placed on the Eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, France, the only EU member state with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council that is also a nuclear power is appearing to be a counterweight to Ankara. France has critical interests in the wider African and Eastern Mediterranean regions and is not pleased with Turkey’s attempt to expand its footprint. Greece as a result finds itself in the midst of a peculiar strategic competition between Paris and Ankara. Turkey is Greece’s historic rival, while France seems willing to support Greece in halting Ankara’s expansionist policies. In this peculiar and rather unequal triangle of influence, Athens risks being trapped both in a confrontation with Ankara and in a relationship of dependence with Paris one that has no clear benefits. Greece must urgently proceed with a fundamental review of its strategy towards Turkey based both on modernizing and boosting its defense and on forming a coherent strategic nexus of regional cooperation with countries which share the same concerns and interests.