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Earth, Water, Air & Gas: The Four Elements of Turkish Geopolitics

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IRINI IACOVIDOU, APR 7 2021

The Ottoman Empire was known as the 'sick man of Europe'; its successor –Turkey – has now become Europe's boogeyman. In clearly realpolitik actions, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has established the Mediterranean region as a stage to showcase his geopolitical prowess. The immediate involved actors, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt, are strengthening their bilateral and multilateral relations to minimize the causalities and mitigate further conundrums caused by Erdoğan's 'bully' tactics. In what can be called as a feast of provocations, Turkey has spawned its web into four geopolitical elements: earth, water, air and gas. After providing a brief conceptual framework, this study will contextualise the four elements of Turkish geopolitics in the south-eastern Mediterranean. The effects of such actions will be critically analysed in order to reach the conclusion that Erdoğan's expansionary visions intrinsically interfere with the sovereignty of the Mediterranean states. This perplexed regional puzzle has led to the militarization of the area which is pivotal for the escalation of the tensions. In the final section, a scope of recommendations will be given as to the de-escalation and stabilisation of tensions.

Conceptual framework

Bluntly put, geopolitics govern global politics. Every action and subsequent reaction can be traced back to geopolitics, assimilating to the "truths" of "geography".[1] Turkey by adopting those truths, opts to expand its sphere of influence over the Eastern Mediterranean –its key to regional power.[2] Geopolitics often involve "competitive zero-sum" approaches for acquiring power and safeguarding security.[3] Geoeconomics and geostrategy have been acutely used by Turkey in achieving both. Geoeconomics considers the management of resources, whilst geostrategy considers the acquirement of "physical control", or the "capability to deny others" such control.[4] With Turkey supporting that it has "the longest shoreline", the geopolitical games in the South-Eastern Mediterranean, are based on who claims a piece of its seabed.[5]

Erdoğan and his party, AKP, have been reforming Turkey from the inside to create a strong country that would match their expansionary foreign policy. This narrative, termed *Erdoganism*, reflects on how the Recep's "personality and style [...] embody the Turkish nation".[6] In bringing Turkey back its former glory, this neo-Ottoman outlook on politics is becoming all the more geopolitical; an aggressive and provocative stance in the Mediterranean region has been a constant in Turkish foreign policy. Earth, water, air and gas are thus the four elements that Turkey is trying to master at bending to assume its power and glory. Due to the multipolarity of the Mediterranean with a conglomerate of "regional states and superpowers [...] non-state actors" and oil corporations, clashes arise.[7]

Context

Hybrid wars have been sensationalised by geopolitics, "blurring the lines between [...] war and peace".[8] The Mediterranean has gradually become a hybrid warzone. By controlling the Mediterranean, the ruling regional power receives a package of "economic and political benefits" due to the energy prospects.[9] The "widening divergence in interests" have alienated Turkey from the other regional actors, while fostering stronger relations between them.[10] This "multipolarity" of the global political order allows countries like Turkey to assimilate "multidirectional and multidimensional foreign policies", depicting, thus, its move-away from its "decades-old security bargain" with the

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West.[11] Turkey has been involved in a frozen conflict in Cyprus after the 1974 invasion, which resulted in the division of the island to the Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Erdoğan in 2003 said: “Cyprus has become an issue causing trouble for Turkey in all areas”. [12] Arguing otherwise, Turkey has, now, become the issue. Turkey is also clashing with Israel and Egypt, [13] isolating itself from the Mediterranean cluster in its quest to assume regional power.

In the very core of the geopolitical clashes, lies the ownership of energy, its “geographical location and role for supply [and] transit of demand”. [14] Turkey’s “geoeconomic strategy” capitalizes on its strategic geographic location, and accompanied by its growing aggregate demand for energy and expansionary visions, it assimilated provocative geostrategies to secure its assumption of regional power. [15] In Figure 1, the energy prospects discovered in the Mediterranean are listed. None belong to the Turkish Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), but that does not mean that Turkey does not actively trying to insert itself in the conversation, as seen in Figure 2.

The “new regional status quo” has encouraged the impacted states to enhance inter-communication. [16] Stronger bilateral and multilateral ties between Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt have been facilitating the adoption of the new status quo. After all, a stronger Levant will ultimately stand its ground opposite the Turkish sultan-like Recep. What pushed forward their agenda, however, was the imminent threat of Turkey, which declared its plans to explore the Mediterranean waters henceforth 2017. [17] The ownership and allocation of resources for each country’s geoeconomic strategies were bound to clash. [18] While “oil and gas financing” is falling, the distribution of resources becomes only economically viable through the route of Turkey, laying the groundwork for games of aggression, provocation and coercion. [19]

The aftermath

Earth

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, once talked about “Pax Mediterranean”; [20] in 2020, the exact opposite is observed, as the “growing militarization of the region” has been top priority of all actors involved. [21] Unlike the rest, Turkey refrains from recognising the Mediterranean as a unity and “political entity” and adopts different approaches for each country. [22] Greece and the E.U. are facing the refugee crisis, while Cyprus is facing Turkish breaches of international law, in what Turkey did not anticipate as the “internationalisation” of the Cyprus Dispute. [23] To understand its stance in these two countries, one must look at very ideology of the ruling party – AKP. Shifting from its reformist beginning, it has now adopted a neo-Ottoman tradition (Erdoganism) where Turkey, as an anti-Western regional power, assumes power in the Mediterranean to control the Middle East. These perplexed interconnections of the Mediterranean geopolitical games are vital for Turkey to assume the Ottoman glory. [24]

Turkey capitalizes on the E.U. and Greece’s fears in “[unleashing] on the bloc through Greece more refugees and migrants”. [25] Although initially there was trust between Turkey and the E.U., the latter’s growing “solidarity with Greece”, “Ankara’s refusal to readmit people”, Erdoğan’s dubiety and the Evros incident in March 2020, have shattered the already vulnerable trust. [26] More specifically, a mass of refugees and migrants aided by the Turkish forces entered Greece when Turkey opened the Evros border, pushed people to Greece and then re-locked it. [27] Erdoğan’s, inherently realpolitik, power-move allowed him to assume power over Greece and the E.U. His threat of opening the gates was materialised, with the possibility of repetition. The mayhem caused accompanied by the “soft sanctions” of the E.U. rang victory bells for Erdoğan, who is portrayed, by his government’s media, as the general who tirelessly defeats everything. [28] The trickle-down effects of Erdoğan’s actions are the endangerment of human lives, the crippling down of the socio-economic structures of Greece, the fraying trust between the latter and the E.U. and finally the delegitimisation of the E.U.’s power to protect its own member state as well as human lives. Turkey’s vitality as a “stepping stone” to the influx of refugees and the “limbo” state of the refugees in the Greek islands sharply clash, clearly distinguishing who is the predator and who the victim. [29]

Since the 1974 invasion in Cyprus, Turkey has been advocating that its mere purpose is to safeguard and protect Turkish-Cypriots. [30] In October 2020, as a move to ensure widespread support for far-right Ersin Tatar in the elections in the TRNC, Turkey allowed for the opening of the ghost town Varosha which was deserted after the

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second illegal invasion in August 1974.[31] Following the Security Council resolutions which provided for the re-inhabitation of Varosha only by its original inhabitants, obligations under international law were clearly breached.[32] Other than condemnations, little has happened and Tatar won the elections. Another victory for Turkey. Interestingly, the U.S.A. has stepped in to lift a “33-year arms embargo on Cyprus and deepened its security cooperation with Nicosia”, after a visit by the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Cyprus.[33] The embargo initially aimed at promoting reconciliation, but considering that this has now become a midsummer’s midnight dream, the Mediterranean region is championing for its militarisation.[34] The choice of non-Mediterranean actors to get involved in the regional geopolitics heighten the urgency as well as the effects of Turkish geopolitical games.

Water

Besides the illegal drillings in the Cypriot EEZ, Turkey’s memorandum with Libya has absolutely made its geopolitical intentions distinct. The agreement “[violated] the Law of the Sea and has been criticized [...] as provocative”.[35] Turkey aimed at redrafting the nautical boundaries to benefit themselves and Libya, as Erdoğan disputes the “continental shelf” entitled by Crete and Cyprus.[36] Turkey also maintains that Greece is wrongfully claiming the whole of Aegean, by arguing that they are only “defending their blue homeland”, according to Cem Gürdeniz.[37] In simpler terms, they are opting to find a way-in as they “cannot explore and exploit the Mediterranean seabed”.[38] To counter such provocations, the Cypriot navy is “[buying] two Israeli-manufactured hi-tech patrol vessels”, depicting the strengthening of their bilateral relations.[39] Equally, Greece is to increase its fleet by 7 to 8 unmanned airborne apparatus, and arrange Israeli trainings to modernise its defense capabilities.[40] The militarization of the Mediterranean is now an undisputed fact.

Air

In August 2020, Turkey “intercepted six Greek F-16 jets [...] amid growing tensions with Athens over energy exploration rights”.[41] The Turkish government still does not consider the “flights by Turkish fighter jets over the Aegean” a provocation.[42] These flights occurred among 10-6 nautical miles from Greek territory, and on occasions even above Greek islands.[43] In light of this, Greece is opting to update its “defense capabilities” by purchasing 18 “French-made Rafale fighter places”.[44] The Israeli willingness to “militarily protect Noble’s exploratory activities” in the Cypriot EEZ indicates that energy is the common denominator of the regional geopolitical games and that the actors involved, except Turkey, are forging strong alliances to share information, communicate and inevitably survive.

Gas

Everyone wants a piece of the Mediterranean pie due to its energy prospects. The question however lies in who will get the bigger piece. The Turkish ‘bully’ tactics that do not seem to get the appropriate international condemnation only feed Erdoğan’s visions further. The economic viability of running a pipeline from Cyprus through Turkey, costing approximately \$4.78 billion, unlike through Greece (approximately \$19.5 billion), gives leverage to Turkey.[45] The geopolitics of gas welcome both shrewd geo-economics and geostrategy. A coherent reaction from the other Mediterranean actors is deemed necessary; “Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority sought to give institutional shape to their energy strategies” through the establishment of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum.[46] Likewise, the summit in Corsica of the Mediterranean 7 hosted by Macron, proves the urgency of the conflict.[47]

France has strong interests in the Mediterranean considering that Total, a French company, is conducting exploratory activities in the Cypriot EEZ.[48] Until October 2020, Turkey’s Yavuz was illegally operating in the Cypriot EEZ.[49] Through the Franco-Cypriot “defense cooperation agreement”, cooperation will be provided in terms of “armament, defense technology and staff training in France’s military schools”.[50] The E.U.’s quasi-appeasement policy, by not holding a stronger stance against Turkey, endangers the balance of power in the region. The acknowledgment by Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, that the distance between the E.U. and Turkey is growing is firstly insufficient and dreadfully late.[51] The conflict of energy has initially started as a geopolitical one between Turkey and Greece with Cyprus in the middle, but now it is spanning from Israel, to Egypt,

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Libya and the United Arab Emirates.[52] The gas prospects in the Mediterranean is a blessing in disguise; since their discovery, more issues have arose than actual benefits. For the de-escalation of the tension in the Mediterranean a wider and a more decisive approach towards Turkey is needed, as by appeasing Erdoğan, his bully tactics will only become harsher.

Recommendations

Back in 2001 Candar and Fuller gave their scope – their 7 principles to be exact – on the actions Turkey should take to ensure balance in the Mediterranean, which, inter alia, encouraged a “good-neighbour policy”, the “emergence of democracy”, the overcoming of “the negative features of the Ottoman period” and “close ties with Europe”.^[53] This is far from the reality of 2020. The E.U. must clearly coordinate its integration to take a decisive stance either through sanctions or through actively pursuing the initiation of negotiations between Turkey, Cyprus and Greece. To solve the Cyprus Dispute might prove catalytic in being a stepping stone for wider balance in the Mediterranean. In the end, the E.U. needs to ensure the smooth transfer of gas from the Mediterranean, as it would allow it to rely less on gas exports from Russia, “[strengthening its] energy security”.^[54] An E.U.-Turkey dialogue may also be beneficial, but the imposition of effective sanctions may be more effective in the short-run. Jan Claude Juncker, when asked about the E.U.’s next steps, said that albeit not a fan of sanctions himself, they appear to be the only effective route.^[55] Condemnations of abstention, evidently, do not work on Erdoğan’s realpolitik and the E.U. has no longer the time and space to remain a mere bystander of events.

Considering that Turkey is not a signatory of the Law of the Sea,^[56] international law might have little effect on the case of the Mediterranean Continental Shelf. Further deals and agreements of the immediately involved actors in the South-Eastern Mediterranean are welcomed and encouraged, because in solidarity they can succeed. Albeit not always positive, the involvement of countries like France and the U.S.A. will definitely bring to the forefront the case of the Mediterranean; the higher its coverage, the higher the chances of pressures on Turkey by the international community. In this geopolitical game of pure realpolitik, decisive actions taken in unity are needed.

Conclusion

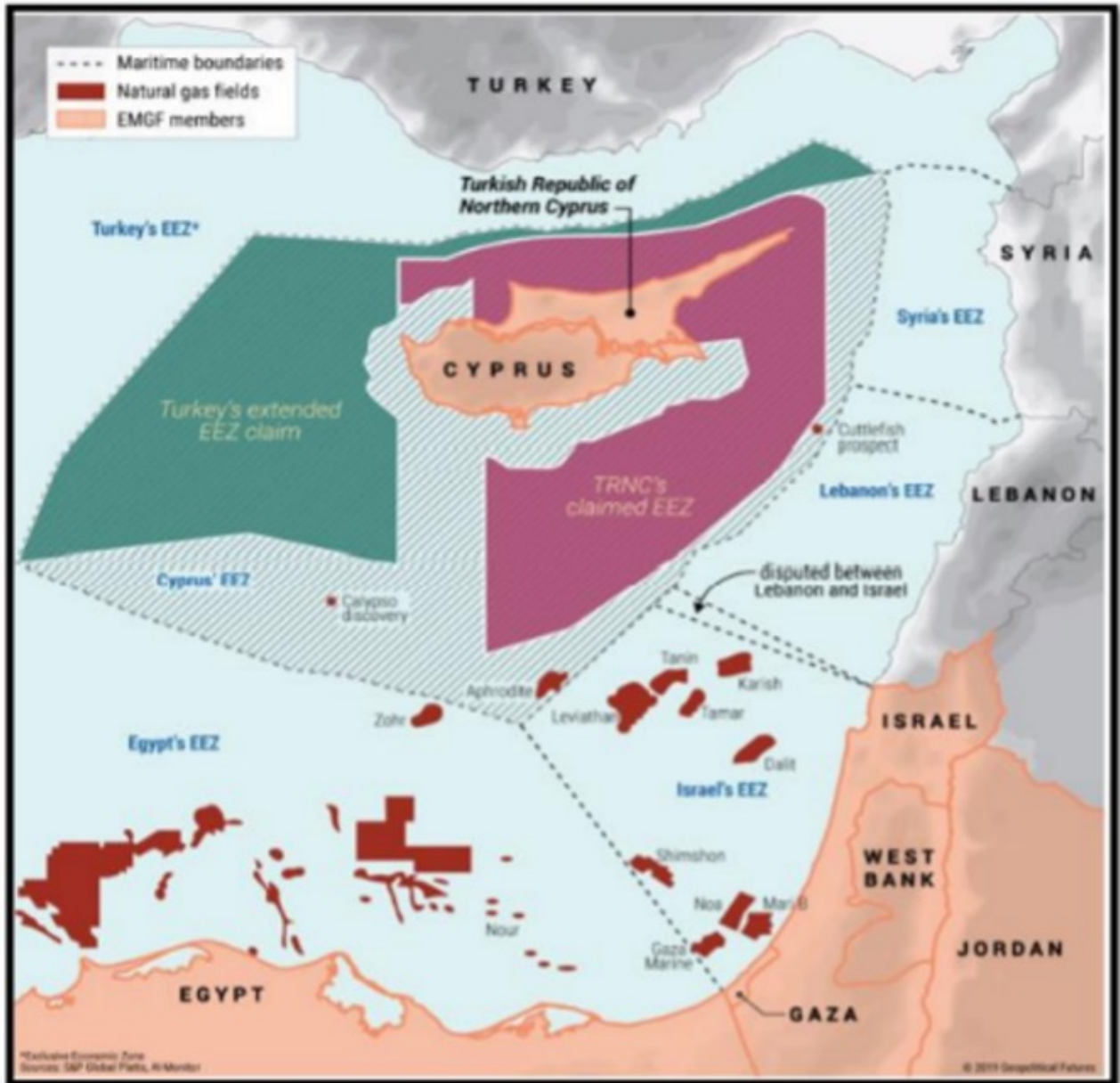
In essence, Erdoğan’s vision of seeing Turkey regaining its Ottoman glory does not correspond with the individual sovereignty of each state in the Mediterranean region. This study attempted to critically analyse the four elements of Turkish geopolitics – earth, water, air and gas. After providing a conceptual framework of the main concepts, it contextualised the tensions in the Mediterranean and showcased the geoeconomics of the distribution of energy, the geostrategy of the refugee crisis and the geopolitical bully tactics conducted both in sea and air. The militarization of the Mediterranean, albeit, alarming, was also the expected reaction to Turkey’s actions. A more concretely integrated E.U. will help to de-escalate and stabilize the tensions through the adoption of effective sanctions and/or the initiation of negotiations. The strengthening ties among Cyprus, Israel, Greece and Egypt are also welcomed. The *fait accompli* of geopolitics is undisputed, and the actors in the Mediterranean arena must pay their dues to survive. Erdoğan is, after all, a force to be reckoned with.

Figures and tables

Figure 1: Major Gas Fields in the Eastern Mediterranean (Shama 2019)

Gas Field	Country	Discovery Year	Potential Reserves (trillion cubic feet)
Tamar	Israel	2009	10
Leviathan	Israel	2010	22
Aphrodite	Cyprus	2011	5
Zohr	Egypt	2015	30
Calypso	Cyprus	2018	6-8
Glaucus	Cyprus	2019	5-8

Figure 2 (Shama 2019)



Natural Gas Cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean [Source: "Natural Gas Cooperation in the Eastern Med", Geopolitical Futures, 22 November 2019]

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