

Turkey: Unopposed in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea

Written by Mark Bhaskar

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MARK BHASKAR, OCT 16 2021

The re-emergence of Turkey as a major military power has altered the dynamics of the Mediterranean, bringing together a diverse set of allies whose interests are threatened by prospective Turkish expansion. However, the gap in military power between Turkey and its adversaries is growing with few demonstrable measures taken by Mediterranean powers to compensate and rebalance the regional system. The imbalance is acute in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, where Turkey seeks to redraw maritime boundaries and repudiate treaties to enable its surveys for potential undersea hydrocarbons to address its rising energy demands.

Over the last two years, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) has developed a capable, expeditionary military force able to project power abroad into areas under the influence of modern great powers such as the United States and Russia. Turkey inflicted a strategic defeat on the former in October 2019, when a Turkish incursion severed the ground lines of communication of U.S. forces operating northeastern Syria, forcing American troops to retreat approximately 250 km to the eastern extremities of the country where they remain in small enclaves around Syria's oil fields. Washington's influence in Syria has never recovered. A few months later, the Turkish military fought the combined forces of Russia, the Syrian government, and Iran in Idlib Province in northwestern Syria. Though Ankara lost some ground, the Turkish military retained Idlib city center and has strengthened its position in the province to deter future attacks. In Libya, Turkey's military intervention on behalf of the UN-recognized Government of National Accord ended the siege of Tripoli, defeating Russian and UAE mercenaries. Finally, in just over a month Turkey enabled Azerbaijan's recapture of nearly half of Armenian-held Nagorno-Karabakh. Only the intervention of Russia prevented the wholesale destruction of Armenian forces.

Despite these qualified achievements, the TAF continues to build its forces and widen the preexisting gap in military capabilities between Turkey and its multiple regional adversaries. Central to this buildup are the TCG Anadolu, a ship with the explicit purpose of amphibious assault operations, the MILGEM Project, which will furnish the Turkish Navy with a new surface combatant every year until 2030, and a line of unmanned missile boats. Turkey will equip their surface ships with the ATMACA anti-ship missile, successfully tested in June. Turkish defense industries have additional plans to build diesel submarines, landing ships, and minelayers that will further bolster the Turkish military's advantage in the Eastern Mediterranean. This is not to mention Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system and its indigenously-produced short-range ballistic missiles, first used in Iraq against armed Kurdish groups in 2019. Underpinning these military reforms is the *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland) strategy endorsed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2019. Per *Mavi Vatan*, Turkey intends to acquire additional maritime territory in the Aegean, Black, and Mediterranean Seas at the expense of Greece and the Republic of Cyprus (RoC). Small, lightly defended Greek islands such as Kastellorizo, Karpathos, Kasos, and Symi are obstacles to the full implementation of this strategy.

Opposing Turkish expansion in the Mediterranean is an informal coalition of states that possess varying degrees of willingness and capability to demonstrably deter Ankara. The leading member of this coalition is France, the closest approximate to a regional hegemon in the Mediterranean Sea. In September, France entered into a mutual defense pact with Greece and pledged to provide Athens with three surface combatants (with an option for a fourth). This follows separate agreements for France to sell 24 Rafale fighter jets to Greece and a French carrier strike group patrol in the Eastern Mediterranean earlier this year. While significant, there is reason to doubt France's commitment to an anti-Turkish mission. Though President Emmanuel Macron has emerged as one of the foremost champions of

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Kurdish nationalism, French military forces in Iraq and Syria remain focused on the Islamic State rather than helping Kurdish groups retake territory occupied by Turkey. Despite sending troops to aid the Libyan National Army's campaigns against the Islamic State in Benghazi, the French military was noticeably absent as Turkish forces drove the LNA out of Tripoli and across central Libya. A French naval frigate, patrolling the Mediterranean Sea to prevent weapons from reaching Libya, fled after a Turkish vessel targeted it rather than risk confrontation. And in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh War, France's support for Armenia did not extend beyond rhetoric. When faced with opportunities to confront the Turkish military even by proxy, Paris has consistently backed down.

Greece, despite being the nation most threatened by Turkish territorial designs, seems to lack both the capability and the will to blunt Turkish power. Since the creation of *Mavi Vatan* in 2006, Greek defense spending has declined 8 out of the intervening 14 years, including during the first year of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' administration. Mitsotakis has largely deferred the Eastern Mediterranean security issue to international arbitration rather than build the necessary forces and alliances to constrain Turkish behavior. Greek defense industries remain focused on intelligence platforms rather than kinetic systems more suited to maintaining Greece's territorial integrity. The Hellenic Armed Forces also face shortages in manpower, armor, combat aircraft, artillery, and naval vessels vis-à-vis Turkey and a lack of combat experience relative to the TAF. Finally, Greece has handicapped the defense of its islands by generally adhering to a series of treaties prohibiting the militarization of the island chains closest to Turkey, making them attractive targets for the Turkish military.

On paper, Egypt appears the logical counterweight to Turkey in the Mediterranean. The Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) have numerical superiority over Turkey in almost all military systems and manpower. In June 2020, the Egyptian Parliament voted to send troops to Libya if the TAF continued its operations beyond central Libya, after which time Turkish offensives ceased. While its willingness to counter Turkey is clear, Cairo's capability to do so is not. International observers note that the Egyptian military can neither maintain nor operate most of its equipment, to the point where it is doubtful that the EAF could have followed through on its pledge in Libya. Under President Abdel el-Sisi, the EAF has become more integrated into the Egyptian economy, which has eroded its professionalization and readiness to respond to crises. From a doctrinal perspective, the EAF remains focused on conventional military operations on or near its territory rather than expeditionary operations. Egypt also has far more pressing security issues close to home, with the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam threatening its water supply and with a lingering insurgency by the Islamic State in the Sinai Peninsula.

The RoC, Israel, and the UAE are often erroneously considered partners to the anti-Turkish coalition developing in the Mediterranean. From a military standpoint, the RoC is a negligible country whose security is entirely dependent on external guarantors Greece, the United Kingdom, and the United Nations. The RoC cannot be expected to contribute to an anti-Turkish mission outside its territory given the overwhelming superiority of Turkish military forces already occupying northern Cyprus. As for Israel, for all of the rhetorical blows traded by Ankara and Tel Aviv during the rule of President Erdogan, Turkey is Israel's largest trading partner in the Mediterranean region. It is unlikely that the Israeli Navy, generally focused on small-scale operations in littoral waters, would send an expeditionary force beyond its borders to aid Greece, which struggles with anti-Semitism. Furthermore, Turkey and Israel also face a shared threat in the form of Iran. Tehran's weapon shipments across Iraq and Syria in support of operations against Israel and its rocket attacks via proxy on Turkish forces in Iraq could serve as a springboard for future Israeli-Turkish cooperation. Finally, the UAE has opted for accommodation, rather than competition, with Turkey in recent months after defeats in Libya and Yemen showcased the limits of Abu Dhabi's military power.

If the aforementioned states wish to deter Turkish expansion, then all powers need to enter into a more formalized alliance. The mutual defense pact involving France and Greece is a start, but incomplete without the inclusion of Egypt, which is better positioned from a geographical standpoint to offer defensive aid to Greece. Instead of intermittent exercises involving Greece and either France or Egypt, the three countries need to conduct air, naval, and amphibious exercises in tandem on a regular basis if they intend to deter Turkish operations. Such an alliance would be lacking without an intelligence sharing agreement and joint operational planning for contingencies involving different expressions of Turkish power – which go beyond conventional military means and include the weaponization of refugees, hostage diplomacy, and diaspora mobilization. Most importantly, Greece needs to offer France and Egypt a permanent and joint military presence on a Greek island, such as Naxos, that could be prepositioned to

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intervene in the event of Turkish attack. Short of these measures, current and future Turkish leaders may reasonably conclude that given their military superiority over their lackadaisical regional adversaries that international borders are malleable.

About the author:

Mark Bhaskar is a PhD candidate in the School of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews. His doctoral research focuses on empire-building in the 21st century, with a focus on the imperial strategies of modern China, Iran, and Turkey. He previously worked as military analyst in the United States covering the conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh.