



Rising Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy

Ebru Oğurlu

Abstract

Over the last few years, the Eastern Mediterranean has been increasingly fraught with growing competition between regional players, most notably Turkey, Cyprus, and Israel, signalling an apparent return of power politics in regional relations. Of all actors involved, Turkey stands out for being both an ever more influential power and a source of serious concern to other countries in the region due to its greater assertiveness and perceived hegemonic ambitions. Against the backdrop of recent regional developments and their international implications, including the dispute over drilling rights off Cyprus' coasts, Turkey's image as a constructive and dialogue-oriented country, a critical achievement pursued by a generation of Turkish politicians, diplomats and officials, risks being replaced by one of an antagonistic/assertive power. Facing the first serious challenge to its claim to embody a benign model as a secular Muslim democracy and a responsible international actor, Turkey should not indulge in emotional reactions. It should opt instead for a more moderate and balanced approach based on the assumption that only cooperation and constructive dialogue, even with rival countries, can help it realize its ambition of being the regional pivot.

Keywords: *Turkey / Turkish Foreign Policy / Eastern Mediterranean / Oil and gas reserves / Bilateral relations / Cyprus / Israel / Greece / United States / European Union*

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by Ebru Oğurlu*

Introduction

The serious strain in relations between Turkey, Cyprus¹ and Israel has emerged as a significant development of 2011. Resulting from new as well as old sources of friction, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean escalated in late summer 2011, forcing many countries, including Turkey, to re-adjust their regional policies.

The Eastern Mediterranean has come to occupy an ever more central role in Turkish foreign policy, particularly following the crisis with Israel over the Freedom Flotilla incident in late May 2010 - when eight Turkish nationals and one Turkish American citizen were killed in international waters following the Israeli navy's interception of ships carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza - and political turmoil in Syria. Sub-regional relations were further strained when the Greek Cypriot government declared that it would start drilling activities off the coast of the island following the discovery of vast amounts of oil and gas reserves in disputed waters. While the Greek Cypriots contend that they are entitled to conduct the drilling, the Turkish-inhabited northern part of the island, which is a de facto independent state, contests this claim. Turkey, as the only country with formal relations with North Cyprus, also opposes (Greek) Cyprus' decision.

The dispute over drilling rights has emerged at a critical time, as Turkish-Israeli relations have plunged to its lowest point in history. Moreover, these rifts in the Eastern Mediterranean are closely interlinked with recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa, where a number of popular uprisings have shaken, and sometimes overthrown, long-lasting authoritarian regimes. Therefore, the dispute over natural resources in the Eastern Mediterranean cannot be confined only to the issue of energy. Rather, it is a multi-dimensional crisis, linked to conflicting sovereignty claims among prominent actors in the region.

Against such a chaotic backdrop, these rising tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean risk becoming a geostrategic minefield. Turkey is currently involved in a number of regional crises spanning its fight against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in North Iraq, the armed group which seeks greater autonomy for Kurds living in Turkey; the difficult management of the Syrian uprising; and the intractable Israeli-Palestinian

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¹ According to international law, only the Greek/Southern part of Cyprus - under the name of the Republic of Cyprus - is recognized as the legitimate representative of the whole island. Unless indicated otherwise, the paper will use the term Cyprus to refer to the internationally recognized part of the island.

conflict. All this contributes to making Ankara an ever more critical actor in the region. The country's much publicized policy of "zero-problems with neighbours" (as Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu famously put it²) is however encountering mounting difficulties, to the extent that some commentators have warned about the risk of Turkey ending up with "zero relations", rather than zero problems, with its neighbours.³ Turkey faces the risk of being perceived by regional countries as a would-be regional hegemon, something which runs counter to Davutoğlu's theory, which is based on the appeal of Turkey's soft power. This study attempts to show how and why Turkey's positive and constructive role risks being replaced by the image of an antagonistic and assertive country due to its policy choices in the Eastern Mediterranean.

1. The Origins of Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean

Coastal countries deem the Eastern Mediterranean highly significant for their national interests. Thus, any dispute or conflicting claim among regional countries can easily turn into an issue of serious controversy, even implying the risk of confrontation.

1.1. The Dispute on Natural Resources

The most recent controversy in the Eastern Mediterranean was triggered by the difficulty for the coastal states to exercise their (claimed) sovereign prerogatives at sea, in particular concerning their rights to oil and gas exploration. In theory, international law stipulates that coastal states have sovereign rights over the areas of sea adjacent to their territories, including internal waters, continental shelves, territorial seas and exclusive economic zones (EEZs). However, it is not always easy to put the theory of international law into practice.

In the Eastern Mediterranean case, the serious controversies specifically concern the rights of the coastal states in their EEZs. According to international law, states are given the right of EEZs extending 200 miles seaward from their coasts.⁴ The important point here is that the right to an EEZ has to be claimed by a state.⁵ Yet Turkey, disputing the legitimacy of the Republic of Cyprus, does not recognize the latter's claimed EEZ. More specifically, Turkey accepts neither the sovereignty of Cyprus nor, consequently, its EEZ along with the rights Cyprus wants to exercise within this area.

The latest spat in the Eastern Mediterranean was at any rate just the cumulative result of a number of previous developments in a region with considerable oil and gas

² Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Zero-Problem Foreign Policy", in *Foreign Policy Online*, 20 May 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/05/20/turkeys_zero_problems_foreign_policy.

³ Deniz Zeyrek, "Türk Dış Politikasında 2012'de neler yaşanacak?" [What will Turkish Foreign Policy experience in 2012?], in *Radikal*, 1 January 2012, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalDetayV3&ArticleID=1074198>.

⁴ Part V (more precisely, Articles 55 to 75) of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

⁵ Alper Ali Rıza, "The Law of the Sea: Turkey vs. Cyprus", in *Today's Zaman*, 13 December 2011, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&newsId=265640.

reserves, which are said to amount to approximately 1 trillion cubic metres.⁶ Indeed, tensions were already on the rise before these recent developments. In 2004, the decision by the Republic of Cyprus to claim its EEZ was met with concern and anger in North Cyprus and Turkey. Cyprus' EEZ agreements with Egypt and Lebanon, which came into force in 2004 and 2007, respectively, added fuel to the fire.⁷ On top of that, Israel discovered an overabundance of natural gas at the Tamar and Leviathan basins in 2010. The Tamar field is estimated to contain approximately 250 billion cubic metres of gas, a quantity that would meet the needs of Israel over the next forty years. Moreover, estimates put the volume of gas at the Leviathan site at double the Tamar reserves.⁸

This discovery by Israel occurred at precisely the same time as relations with Turkey were rapidly deteriorating due to the Freedom Flotilla incident. Coupled with the vicinity of the resource-rich area to the Cypriot-Israeli maritime border, the spat with Turkey facilitated a rapprochement between Israel and Turkey's rival Cyprus. The two countries signed a maritime border agreement in December 2010 to delimit their respective EEZs and cooperate on oil and gas explorations in Cyprus' EEZ. Tensions peaked when the Greek Cypriots started exploratory drilling for gas in the Aphrodite gas field⁹ in September 2011, with the drilling works allocated to Noble Energy Company, a US firm with Israeli participation that has been conducting offshore drills in the Eastern Mediterranean for Israel since 1998. In response, Turkey sent its own exploration vessel to the zone and warned that its navy and air force would keep constant watch.¹⁰ In late 2011 Noble Energy announced the discovery of gas estimated between 140 billion and 226 billion cubic metres in Aphrodite. This amount is said to be large enough to meet Cyprus' natural gas needs for an estimated 150 years.¹¹

The importance of gas exploration for Turkey may be grasped from two different perspectives. First, it is related to the wider Cyprus problem itself due to conflicting claims by both sides over the ownership or sharing of the island's resources. The Greek Cypriots claim that they are the "only recognized representative of the whole island", a statement somehow vindicated by their entry into the EU and the United Nations (UN) under the name of the Republic of Cyprus. Accordingly, they claim to have sovereign rights over the whole EEZ of Cyprus. The Greek Cypriot President, Dimitris Christofias, has declared that the right of his country to conduct exploratory drilling is "non-negotiable" and has protested against any "foreign meddling".¹²

⁶ Stephen Blank, "Turkey and Cyprus' Gas: More Troubles Ahead in 2012", in *Turkey Analyst*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (9 January 2012), <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/turkey/2012/120109B.html>.

⁷ Although the agreement with Egypt was signed in 2003 even before Cyprus proclaimed its EEZ, it entered into force in 2004 after the proclamation of Cyprus' EEZ. For details see Theodore C. Kariotis, "Hydrocarbons and the Law of the Sea in the Eastern Mediterranean: Implications for Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey", in *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Spring 2011), p. 47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁹ The field, called also Plot. No. 12, is within the Greek Cyprus' claimed EEZ and adjacent to the Leviathan field adjoining Israel, Cyprus, Lebanon, Syria and Gaza.

¹⁰ "Cyprus, Turkey and Israel wrestle over gas", in *Euronews*, 23 November 2011, <http://www.euronews.net/2011/11/23/cyprus-turkey-and-israel-wrestle-over-gas>.

¹¹ Stephen Blank, "Turkey and Cyprus' Gas ...", cit.

¹² "Turkey to continue Cyprus gas drill", in *Hurriyet Daily News*, 3 October 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=turkey-to-continue-cyprus-gas-drill-2011-10-03>.

However, he has also said that - even in the absence of a comprehensive solution to the dispute - "Turkish Cypriots, being equal citizens of the Republic of Cyprus like their compatriots the Greek Cypriots, will also benefit from any wealth found in Cyprus' EEZ".¹³

By contrast, Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots find these claims contrary to the 1960 Treaty on the Establishment of the Republic of Cyprus (as an undivided state). In Ankara's eyes, the southern part should not have exclusive rights to these resources. The Turks oppose the Cypriot-Israeli agreement on the ground that the sovereignty is shared between the Turkish and Greek Cypriots. Therefore, natural resources discovered off the coasts of Cyprus belong to both sides, which should fairly participate in the prospective benefits/profits from any reserves. As a corollary to this legal argument, Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots argue that the Greek Cypriots should not exploit resources before reaching a comprehensive settlement on the island. Hence, the oil and gas exploration activities conducted unilaterally by the Greek Cypriots are a blow to the recent peace negotiations between the Turkish and Greek Cypriot leaders under UN auspices. Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has described the Greek Cypriots' drilling activity as nothing but sabotage of the negotiation process.¹⁴ Turkey's EU Minister Egemen Bağış has similarly called it an "open provocation of the UN-brokered peace efforts".¹⁵ Against this backdrop, the dispute is likely to widen the gap between the two parts of Cyprus.

The tensions resulting from the dispute over gas exploration cannot be confined to the deterioration of Turkish/Turkish Cypriot-Greek Cypriot relations. Israel's involvement in the issue has transformed the dispute into a regional one and has led to the formation of new alliances in the region. As is discussed in the following section, the regional power politics among the emerging alliances has become an important reason behind the recent tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

1.2. *The Emerging System of Alliances*

The Mediterranean Sea is an important, if not fundamental, asset for all coastal countries, and Eastern Mediterranean states are no exception. Moreover, since their relationships are often far from ideal, if not altogether hostile, Eastern Mediterranean states tend to be quite assertive in advancing their perceived maritime interests. Over the past years, Turkey has emerged as one of the region's leading actors, thanks to interest in its form of political Islam by a large section of Arab public opinion and its decades-old partnership with the West. Its recent engagement in the region, however, has also fuelled concerns that Turkey is secretly aiming for regional hegemony in what has been dubbed the neo-Ottoman space.¹⁶

¹³ "Christofias Attended Cyprus Federation Annual Gala" in *Greek News*, 25 September 2011, <http://www.greeknewsonline.com/?p=17411>.

¹⁴ "Turkish Premier Says Oil Drilling is a Sabotage" in *Turkish Weekly*, 21 September 2011, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/123769/turkish-premier-says-oil-drilling-is-a-sabotage.html>.

¹⁵ "Bağış rebukes Greek Cyprus on drilling", in *Hurriyet Daily News*, 2 December 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/bagis-rebukes-greek-cyprus-on-drilling.aspx?pageID=238&nID=8364&NewsCatID=338>.

¹⁶ For critical views of neo-Ottomanism see Nora Fisher Onar, "Neo-Ottomanism, Historical Legacies and Turkish Foreign Policy", in *EDAM Discussion Paper Series*, No. 2009/03 (October 2009),

Turkey's declared intention to monitor international waters in the Eastern Mediterranean, for instance, has put it at odds with almost all littoral countries including Cyprus, Israel, Lebanon, Egypt and Syria.¹⁷ Moreover, the recent competition over the region's natural resources is fuelled by long-lasting political and religious quarrels including the Arab-Israeli conflict and Turkish-Greek hostility.¹⁸ As a result, traditional alliances are being replaced by new partnerships in line with the changing national interests of each country.

The alliance between Turkey and Israel has unexpectedly eroded at high speed. Due to its fear of marginalization in, or isolation from the region, Israel has historically seen Turkey as an ally with which it could share a Westernized orientation. Things have gradually started to change after 2008 - during the second term of the Islam-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Erdoğan.¹⁹ Domestically, the AKP's rule has coincided with a shift in the balance of power from the staunchly secularist military-bureaucratic establishment to a moderate Islamist government. Internationally, Erdoğan has been able to distance Turkey from the most controversial policies associated with the West (the 2003 war in Iraq and the nuclear standoff with Iran, just to make a few examples), thereby winning the favour, if not the support, of a good part of the Arab public opinion. Also critical in this regard have been Erdoğan's efforts to defend and promote the cause of the Palestinians.

Against this backdrop, the relationship with Israel has started to crack, not least because Israel has badly mismanaged certain issues on which it has found itself to be at odds with Turkey. Suffice it to mention the public humiliation suffered by Erdoğan in late 2008, when Israel launched its Cast Lead operation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip without informing him about this impending attack, even if Israeli Foreign Minister Ehud Olmert had officially visited Ankara two days earlier. Then came the so-called "lower chair crisis" in January 2010, whereby Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon publicly insulted Turkey's ambassador to Israel, Oğuz Çelikkol. More recently, the Israeli government has refused to apologize for the Freedom Flotilla incident. On top of this, the Arab Spring has contributed to widening the gap between Ankara and Tel Aviv, as the former has shown sympathy and support for the popular uprisings while the latter is mostly concerned that the revolutionary wave might complicate its plans to secure its (moving) borders in the West Bank. At the same time, due to the AKP's more pronounced Islamic orientations, Turkey is keen to expand its influence over the whole Arab world and strengthen economic and political ties to its East,

http://www.edam.org.tr/eng/document/discussion%20paper%20series_fisher.pdf and Michael Rubin, "Shifting Sides? The Problems of Neo-Ottomanism", in *National Review Online*, 10 August 2004, <http://www.meforum.org/628/shifting-sides>. For more detail about Neo-Ottomanism see Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies. Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism", in *Carnegie Papers*, No. 10 (September 2008), http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10_taspinar_final.pdf.

¹⁷ Turkey's concerns about Lebanon and Egypt stem from their maritime border agreements signed with Cyprus. Similarly, past Syrian statements about the need to draw an offshore line with Turkey drew attention in Ankara. Given the current hostility between the two countries, one should not rule out the possibility of tensions reemerging over Turkey's coastal city of Hatay, over which Syria has historical claims.

¹⁸ "Cyprus, Israel move closer on East Med gas", in *United Press International*, 26 August 2011, http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Energy-Resources/2011/08/26/Cyprus-Israel-move-closer-on-East-Med-gas/UPI-62821314382019.

¹⁹ The ruling AKP won three consecutive landslide elections in 2002, 2007 and 2011.

including Iran, something which was excluded from Turkish foreign policy agenda previously. Improved ties with Arab-Muslim countries have been established at the expense of relations with Israel. Amidst these profound changes, the redefinition of national interests and power competition between the two previous partners has left them increasingly at loggerheads.²⁰

As Turkey-Israel relations are in shambles, Israel has become increasingly entangled with Greece and (Greek) Cyprus. The rapprochement was put into practice with the maritime agreement between Israel and Cyprus of December 2010. The cooperation deal has also opened the way for Greece to fill the vacuum Turkey left in Israel's regional relations. High level talks between Israel and Greece have taken place about the construction of an underwater pipeline to Europe which would supposedly make Greece the transit country for Israeli gas to reach Europe, bypassing Turkey, its traditional partner. Such a possibility would likely reduce, and considerably so, Turkey's centrality in the whole energy game. Therefore, Turkey-Cyprus spats over Eastern Mediterranean energy resources have soured Turkey-Greece relations and pushed back implementation of a previously agreed project on the completion of a gas pipeline to pump Caspian gas into South-Eastern Europe.

The Greece-Cyprus-Israel alliance has emerged in parallel with the growing tensions in the Turkey-Greece-Cyprus triangle and the Turkish-Israeli relationship. In this context, Turkey and North Cyprus have also reached an agreement on the delimitation of the continental shelf similar to that between Israel and South Cyprus. The deal for joint gas and oil exploration was signed in September 2011 with the aim of mirroring the Greek Cypriots' plans. At the same time, Prime Minister Erdoğan threatened to blacklist international oil and gas firms that cooperate with the Greek Cypriots and stop them from participating in energy projects in Turkey.²¹ Turkey's move was important symbolically, as it sent a powerful political message that Ankara was willing to defend North Cyprus' interests robustly, including by targeting third countries.²²

To complete the picture, Turkey's realignment in the Eastern Mediterranean has forced Russia to adjust. Moscow has long been on good terms with Cyprus, which is an important source of foreign direct investments in Russia.²³ Unsurprisingly, the Russian

²⁰ The Israeli Operation *Cast Lead* in December 2008-January 2009 led to the famous One-Minute incident at Davos in January 2009, when Prime Minister Erdoğan furiously abandoned a public meeting with Israel's President Shimon Peres in protest against the Israeli operation. The Freedom Flotilla incident, occurred in May 2010, has continued to beset Israeli-Turkish relations ever since. Turkey has been asking for an official apology for the deaths of Turkish citizens, compensation for the families of the dead and those who were wounded, Israel's acceptance of an international team of investigators and an end to the blockade of the Gaza Strip. After a UN report condemned the deaths but justified Israel's blockade of Gaza in September 2011, Turkey drastically reduced diplomatic relations and froze military cooperation and trade with Israel.

²¹ "Turkish minister gives Cyprus confrontation signals", in *Hurriyet Daily News*, 22 September 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=minister-gives-cyprus-confrontation-signals-2011-09-22>.

²² Mustafa Kutlay, "Doğu Akdeniz'de Sertleşen Rekabet: Güney Kıbrıs Rum Kesimi-Türkiye Gerginliğinin Analizi" [The Toughening Competition in Eastern Mediterranean: An Analysis of the Tension between Greek Cyprus and Turkey], in *USAK Analiz*, No. 13 (September 2011), <http://www.usak.org.tr/dosyalar/rapor/ml1xqiaBT9eSOmRh3IXUI8GZTGyECF.pdf>, p. 7

²³ In fact, Cypriot FDI in Russia represent mostly Russian capitals which are invested in Cyprus to evade tax provisions and later reinvested in Russia under a more favourable tax regime.

government has backed Greek Cypriots' rights to develop the gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean (in turn, Cyprus has labelled Moscow "a shield against any threats by Turkey").²⁴

As the complexity summarized above shows, the changing balance of power, the moving alliances between regional actors, and the clash of interests among them have turned the Eastern Mediterranean region into a potential flashpoint of significant magnitude. Hence, the security concerns of regional countries, coupled with their prevalently zero-sum game mentality and military culture, could lead to a full "securitisation of Eastern Mediterranean politics".²⁵

2. Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Different Regional Power?

2.1. Turkey's stakes in the Eastern Mediterranean

Turkey's increased interest in the Mediterranean stems from a shift in its economic development strategy from one based on import-substitution to one aimed at export-led growth. Beginning in the early 1980s, the need for new export markets led Turkey to initiate, develop and expand new relationships with countries that had been hitherto ignored.²⁶ Thus, the Eastern Mediterranean has since emerged in Turkey's foreign policy as an area of economic opportunities rather than simply a set of trouble spots worth keeping an eye on. With such an economic orientation in mind, Turkey has aimed to establish itself as a "trading state"²⁷ in the region. Accordingly, it has expanded its share (and influence) in regional markets and sought new opportunities for further investments. This business perspective has provided a major rationale, albeit not the only one, for Turkey's increasing economic and diplomatic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

For nearly two decades, Turkey's relationships with Eastern Mediterranean countries unfolded along this trade-and diplomatic-driven pattern. However, it was only with the rise to power of the AKP that Turkey's system of regional relations took on a new dimension. Determined to turn Turkey into an influential player well-entrenched in the region, the AKP governments have gradually redefined the country's regional interests, policies, and alliances. In light of such a broader foreign policy horizon, Turkey's relationship with its neighbourhood has become remarkably multi-dimensional, as it

²⁴ Stephen Blank, "Turkey falls out with Russia: Another Sign of a Foreign Policy in Crisis", in *Turkey Analyst*, Vol. 4, No. 22 (21 November 2011), <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/turkey/2011/111121B.html>.

²⁵ Meliha Benli Altunışık, "The eastern Mediterranean: back to power politics", in *Hurriyet Daily News*, 8 September 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=the-eastern-mediterranean-back-to-power-politics-2011-09-08>.

²⁶ İtler Turan, "Turkey and the Mediterranean: Balancing Geopolitics and Geo-Economics", in *Paralleli Policy Briefs*, September 2011, http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/files_mf/turan_geoeconomics_sept111.pdf, p. 2.

²⁷ Kemal Kirişçi, "The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: The rise of the trading state", in *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40 (2009), p. 29-57, http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/news_id_412_5%20-%20Article%20Kemal%20Kirisci.pdf.

has been increasingly defined by cultural affinity, societal exchanges, and intensified diplomatic contacts, in addition to economic and security interests.²⁸

Aware of its ability to manoeuvre among the various countries of the area and act as a bridge between the Middle East and the West, to which it is bound thanks to its NATO membership and EU accession bid, Turkey has started using its geographical position to augment its geopolitical role. In so doing, Turkey has created the conditions to achieve its ultimate goal in the Eastern Mediterranean region: become not only a key player, but also a leading - if not the leading - actor in the Eastern Mediterranean. In other words, Turkey has moved from being a compliant member of the Western community to being an assertive power with the potential of shifting the strategic balance of the whole region.²⁹ Against this backdrop, Turkey is extremely sensitive to developments that can undermine its current status in the Eastern Mediterranean. Ideally, Ankara would want to consolidate its position by way of increasing its soft power, most notably its ever more important role as an Eastern Mediterranean economic hub. Where this turns out not to be possible, Ankara is willing to confront those regional actors that, deliberately or not, curb its regional ambitions. In this extreme derogation from, if not outright reversal of, its “zero problems with the neighbours” policy, Turkey has started to formulate its strategies and policy in competition with other regional actors that have apparently been shaping their regional approach according to an “enemy of my enemy is my friend” mentality (e.g. Israel and Cyprus).³⁰

2.2. *The Regional Implications of Turkey's New Assertiveness*

The implications of Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean policies extend beyond the region's perimeter. Ankara's problems with Israel and Cyprus weigh heavily on its relations with the United States, Israel's staunchest ally, and the European Union (EU), of which Cyprus is a member state. It is therefore useful to look at how these more distant actors evaluate Turkey's changing role in the Eastern Mediterranean.

2.2.1. *Implications for Turkey's Relations with the US*

Turkey-Israel spats have put the US in a difficult position. While traditionally close to Israel, the US has a great interest in preserving its good relations with Turkey, a NATO ally and a Muslim country with growing influence in the Arab world. After the rift over the US-led invasion of Iraq - when the Turkish parliament refused to authorize the use of Turkey's soil and air space for the US campaign - US-Turkish relations seemed to be going back to the usual path of cooperation. Turkey's consent to install NATO missile defence radars in its territory and the critical stance it has taken with regard to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's repression of the opposition movement are good cases in point. Turkey has also re-calibrated its position towards Iran in a manner more compatible with US interests. Widely suspected to have a secret and illegal military

²⁸ İtler Turan, *Turkey and the Mediterranean ...*, cit., p. 2.

²⁹ “Is Cyprus Gas Row Feeding Turkey's Regional Ambitions?”, in *New Turkey*, 10 June 2011, <http://www.thenewturkey.org/new-region/326/is-cyprus-gas-row-feeding-turkeys-regional-ambitions>.

³⁰ Mehmet Ögütçü, *As Eastern Mediterranean's Waters Heat Up, Turkey Should Lead An OSCE-Type Initiative In The Middle East*, London, The European Geopolitical Forum, 3 October 2011, http://gpf-europe.com/upload/iblock/b04/eastern_mediterranean_waters_heat_up_turkey.pdf, p. 4-5.

dimension, Iran's nuclear programme has long been one of the main concerns of the US (as well as the EU). In keeping with its "zero problems with the neighbours" policy, Turkey has so far resisted the US-EU push to isolate Iran internationally and squeeze it financially (in 2010 Turkey went as far as to vote against the imposition of new sanctions by the UN Security Council).³¹ At the same time, however, it has also engaged diplomatically with the Iranians in the hope that it could act as a bridge between the Islamic Republic and Western powers. Turkish cooperation is also critical for the US with regard to Iraq, and in particular its Kurdish-inhabited northern province. Turkey has as great interest in preserving the unity of the Iraqi state as the US has, out of concern that a de facto autonomous Kurdistan in northern Iraq might trigger a new wave of violent separatism in Turkey's Kurdish-inhabited areas.

In sum, there are plenty of reasons for the US to be worried about Turkey's quarrels with Israel. However, the Obama administration has so far done little other than advocating a thaw between its two allies. While expressing support for Israel, Washington has nonetheless refrained from openly criticizing Turkey's rising assertiveness in the Eastern Mediterranean. Eloquent, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did not give a specific answer to the question of "what the US can and wants to do" with regard to the dispute over Cyprus' territorial waters.³² However, considering the historical importance of Israel for the US, the intensity of the US-Israeli political and strategic partnership and a series of disappointments in Turkey-US relations in recent years, Turkey is cautious about not crossing the threshold beyond which the US would be forced to choose between it and Israel. A former State Department official and US ambassador to Turkey, Morton Abramowitz, confirmed that "if conflict breaks out between Turkey and Israel, [w]e'll choose Israel".³³

2.2.2. Implications for Turkey's Relations with the EU

The EU, for its part, has two main concerns: avoiding confrontation between one of its members (Cyprus) and a candidate country to accede the Union (Turkey), and safeguarding its gas supply from the Mediterranean.

The EU has urged Cyprus and Turkey to exert restraint in the gas drilling rights row, and has renewed its call for them to work toward the settlement of the Cyprus problem. The EU's reluctance to get dragged into the dispute, but above all its expressed desire that "Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots will benefit from any benefits that may come from oil drilling"³⁴ has angered the Greek Cypriots. The Turks have nonetheless few

³¹ As a matter of fact, Turkey would have hardly been in the position to vote in favour of sanctions against Iran at the time, as just one month before the vote in the Security Council the Turks had mediated an agreement with Brazil on the provision to Iran of nuclear fuel for a research reactor in Tehran. The agreement, meant to be a confidence-building measure, did not meet any backing from the West. The US and its European partners maintained that the deal was just a much weaker version of a previous agreement Iran had struck with them before backtracking.

³² İlhan Tanır, "Greek and Turkish Cypriots in need of the same language", in *Hurriyet Daily News*, 24 December 2011, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/greek-and-turkish-cypriots-in-need-of-the-same-language.aspx?pageID=449&nID=9879>.

³³ Jay Solomon and Marc Champion, "U.S. Ties to Turkey Face New Strains", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 October 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204294504576617282941472812.html>.

³⁴ "EU concerned on tensions between Turkey and Cyprus", in *Defencegreece*, 11 November 2011, <http://www.defencegreece.com/index.php/2011/11/eu-concerned-on-tensions-between-turkey-and-cyprus>.

reasons to cheer as the energy dispute is set to complicate Turkey's already difficult EU accession process. With its frequent use of inflammatory rhetoric, Ankara has not, for its part, made things easier either in its accession process to the EU or in the regional developments. Prime Minister Erdoğan and Deputy Prime Minister Beşir Atalay declared that in the case of inconclusive peace negotiations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, Turkey will not recognize Greek Cyprus as the holder of the EU Presidency (in the second half of 2012), will not sit at the table with it, and will consider whether to freeze relations with the EU.³⁵ Moreover, after drilling procedures began in September 2011, Turkey's Minister for EU Affairs Bağış issued a veiled threat to Cyprus, stating that "It is for this [reason] that countries have warships. It is for this [reason] that we have equipment and we train our navies".³⁶ Similarly, Prime Minister Erdoğan referred to the joint Israel-Cyprus agreement and drilling as "madness"³⁷ and recalled, many times through different occasions, the presence of Turkish assault ships and frigates in the region.³⁸ Thus, Turkey risks being perceived as the "aggressor state",³⁹ a would-be regional hegemon or, worse, an ambitious power that does not hesitate to brandish the banner of Islam against non-Muslim countries such as Cyprus and Israel in order to achieve its hegemonic objectives. Indeed, Turkey's unbalanced and rather emotional reaction to the dispute is endangering the image of a constructive and dialogue-oriented country that has taken years to build and consolidate.

The other urgent concern of the EU in the Eastern Mediterranean concerns the security and diversification of its gas supply, notoriously a critical issue for the Union due to its growing dependence on a limited number of third parties (especially on Russia).⁴⁰ The European Commission's Communication on *Energy Infrastructure Priorities for 2020 and Beyond*, published in 2010, depicts the Mediterranean as a possible corridor for the diversification of the EU's energy supply.⁴¹ The EU maintains that the gas fields found by the Israelis, and even more so the natural gas reserves discovered in Cyprus' EEZ, can guarantee gas supply in such a big scale that it would be eventually able to diminish its dependence on Russia. Consequently, the EU's interest in the Eastern Mediterranean regional developments not only stem from its worries about a deteriorating security situation there, but also from its perceived imperative of putting its energy supply on firmer bases.

³⁵ "Turkey 'to freeze relations' with the EU", in *EurActiv*, 19 September 2011, <http://www.euractiv.com/enlargement/turkey-freeze-relations-eu-news-507731>; "Turkey won't recognise Greek Cyprus as EU Presidency, in *Today's Zaman*, 15 October 2011, <http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=259999.

³⁶ "Erdoğan eyes blocking East Med gas boom", in *United Press International*, 14 September 2011, http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Energy-Resources/2011/09/14/Erdogan-eyes-blocking-East-Med-gas-boom/UPI-43831316020734.

³⁷ "Erdogan: Cyprus, Israel drilling is 'madness'", in *Haaretz*, 22 September 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/themarket/erdogan-cyprus-israel-drilling-is-madness-1.385945>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Mustafa Kutlay, "Doğu Akdeniz'de Sertleşen Rekabet ...", cit., p. 4.

⁴⁰ As Eneko Landaburu, the then European Commission's Director General for External Relations, said in 2008, the EU needs a diversification strategy with the objective of depending less on Russia for gas consumption, "EU 'wrong' to prioritise energy diversification", in *EurActiv*, 15 October 2008, <http://www.euractiv.com/energy/eu-wrong-prioritise-energy-diversification/article-176380>.

⁴¹ European Commission, *Energy Infrastructure Priorities for 2020 and Beyond-A blueprint for an Integrated European Energy Network* (COM(2010) 677 final), Brussels, 17 November 2010, [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=SPLIT_COM:2010:0677\(01\):FIN:EN:PDF](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=SPLIT_COM:2010:0677(01):FIN:EN:PDF), p. 11.

Against the backdrop of growing tensions, emerging rivalries and new alliances, it can be argued that a zero-sum-game logic has come to dominate interstate relations in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁴² The most dramatic result of this game would be a military confrontation between any two regional countries. Although escalation into full-blown conflict seems unlikely, the persisting existence of such undercurrents of conflict poses a potentially serious threat to the stability and security of the region.

Conclusion

Recent developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, ranging from the drilling dispute off the coasts of Cyprus to the implications of the Arab Spring for regional countries, risk turning the region once again into an area dominated by power politics. At the heart of such region, Turkey faces a number of internal and external challenges that directly influence, or are directly influenced by, developments in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The internal challenge results from the impact of tensions in the Mediterranean on Turkish domestic politics. Turkey's assertive rhetoric, especially with regard to nationally sensitive issues such as relations with Cyprus, is generally well received by the majority of the population as an indication of a strong, powerful and determined country. A tough line on the Cyprus issue mobilizes popular support across the entire political spectrum. Similarly, standing up for the rights of the Palestinians against Israel wins widespread public favour. Thus, the AKP government can reasonably hope to reap the benefits of its assertive stance in terms of more votes and consolidation of its domestic rule. For the AKP, greater support from the public opinion is crucial at the moment. The ruling party is under pressure, both domestically and internationally, for a number of measures that have restricted human rights and fundamental freedoms - press freedom being the most serious one. The popularity gained thanks to an assertive foreign policy can therefore be used by the government to compensate the weakening image of a reform-oriented and democratic force inside the country, and to guarantee public support for the AKP's domestic agenda.

External challenges confronting Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean policy revolve around the issues of energy and the wider Cyprus problem with its impact on both the sovereign rights over the island's resources and Turkey's EU accession process. Related to the energy issue, Turkey's main concern is to safeguard its position as a transit country and as a hub for EU oil and gas supplies. Therefore, it is sensitive to all regional developments that might thwart its plans to become an energy bridge to Europe. Concerning the relations with the EU, tensions between Turkey and the Greek Cypriots may be exploited by those EU member states that are already against Turkey's membership to complicate further Turkey's dealings with the EU.

These external and internal challenges make the Eastern Mediterranean an area of great, if not vital, interest for Turkey, perhaps the region's most ambitious player. In economic terms, it is a market for Turkish exports. In security terms, it is an area from which a number of potential threats to Turkey emanate. In social and cultural terms, it

⁴² Mustafa Kutlay, "Doğu Akdeniz'de Sertleşen Rekabet ...", cit., p. 7.

is a mostly Muslim-inhabited zone where an increasingly active public opinion looks at the AKP's moderate version of political Islam as a potential model to reconcile religious sensitivities with political openness and pluralism. In political terms, finally, it is an area where Turkey has extensive diplomatic contacts and on which it can exert a certain degree of influence.

One question that arises is what sort of regional power Turkey wants to become. At this stage, there are a number of options for Turkey. It might emerge as an over-assertive power aiming to become the region's hegemon, defending what it perceives as its national interests while tightening ties with all regional actors. It might side with the West, thus selecting regional actors to partner with and others to keep at arms' length. Or, finally, it might try to strike a balance between these two options, cultivating relations with a vast array of states and non-state actors in the region, while remaining anchored to the Euro-Atlantic alliance. In this context, what Turkey needs to avoid is taking steps that might have unexpected consequences eventually resulting in greater regional instability.

Turkey's recent foreign policy moves have already estranged several actors in the region. Given that keeping with this path may hold a relatively high risk of backlash, the government in Ankara would be better off if it followed a more moderate and balanced approach. As Alon Ben-Meir argues, one of the criteria to test Turkey's leadership's competence will be "its capacity to balance its relations with the powers in its diverse neighbourhood without trading one bilateral relation for the other".⁴³ Accordingly, Turkey would rise to the status of a truly influential regional pivot state only if it builds strong ties with both near and far neighbours with the view to shaping the regional environment along a non-confrontational, and where possible cooperative, pattern.

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⁴³ Alon Ben-Meir, "Mending a Strained Alliance", in *Huffington Post*, 23 October 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alon-benmeir/mending-a-strained-allian_b_332062.html.

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