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# The conundrum of the great gas game and the ensuing strategic realignment in the eastern Mediterranean

During the summer of 2020 the prevailing tension in the Eastern Mediterranean[1] escalated in an alarming manner, to the point that in August, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said that "*any little spark could trigger disaster*"[2]. Over the last two decades, the discovery of significant gas deposits in this area has revived long-standing disputes between Greeks and Turks (partition of Cyprus, Aegean Sea continental shelf, etc.), but the potential tensions also extend to other countries in the eastern Mediterranean basin and involve organisations such as the European Union and NATO. More generally, they are taking place in a context where recent conflicts (Syria, Libya) are destabilising the Middle East. The paradox of this great gas game is that it has come at a time when the Covid-19 crisis has spectacularly driven down the price of hydrocarbons, making the cost of offshore operations exorbitant. Consequently, gas is undoubtedly not the only stake in this succession of differences and appears to be the most visible manifestation of a much broader strategic reshaping.

## REVIEW OF THE ORIGINS OF AN ANCIENT GREEK-TURKISH ANTAGONISM

At the end of the First World War and especially after the Turkish War of Independence (1919-22), the Greeks, driven out of Anatolia by Mustafa Kemal's troops, retained most of the Aegean islands. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which sealed the end of hostilities between the two belligerents, nevertheless led in the inter-war period to their reconciliation with the signing of a friendship treaty in 1930 and the Balkan Pact in 1934. However, after the Second World War, several events contributed to a rekindling of Greek-Turkish antagonism.

Firstly, in 1947, after its defeat Italy ceded the Dodecanese archipelago in the southern Aegean to Greece, to the great displeasure of Turkey, which did not enter the war against the Axis powers until February 1945. Secondly, the decolonisation of Cyprus was marked by serious intercommunal incidents between Greeks and Turks. The fragile equilibrium established after Cypriot independence was definitively broken in 1974, when a *coup d'état* against the regime of Bishop Makarios, led by the Greek Junta, triggered a Turkish military intervention in the north of the island and the division of the island into two parts[3] with the creation in 1983 of a "*self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus*" recognised only by Turkey, which settled many of its nationals there. Finally, from the end of the 1950s onwards, the development of the international Law of the Sea fuelled a lasting dispute between Greece and Turkey - with Turkey refusing to subscribe to the main conventions because it believed that it would give Greece almost complete sovereignty over the Aegean Sea. In fact, Ankara sets its own concepts against those established by the Law of the Sea to which Greece subscribes and declares, in particular, that if Athens were to extend its territorial waters to the Aegean Sea to twelve nautical miles, it would be committing a *casus belli*[4]. On two occasions in 1987[5] and 1996[6], the maritime disputes between the two States almost degenerated into armed conflict.

However, it has to be acknowledged that over the last two decades there was a certain lull in these tensions, with the official recognition of Turkey's application to join the European Union in December 1999 and the opening of accession negotiations in 2005[7] which are now in gridlock: only one chapter has been closed

[1] See CASABIANCA Jean, "Mediterranean : a Paradigm of contemporary conflict", *Schuman Report on Europe, State of the Union 2020*, Marie B editions, Paris, July 2020, 27 pp.  
[2] "Berlin appelle à une désescalade des tensions entre Athènes et Ankara", *Toute l'Europe*, 26 August 2020.  
[3] ROGER, Ludwig. « La Commission européenne face aux tensions gréco-turques », *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, vol. 108, no. 4, 2012, pp. 52-57.

[4] OLLIER Johanna, "Les frontières maritimes au cœur de la compétition en mer Égée et au Levant", *Diplomatie*, n°105, September /October 2020 p. 50-52

[5] CHICLET Christophe, "Le lourd contentieux avec la Grèce", *Le Monde diplomatique*, November 1987, p. 21

[6] KADRITZKE Niels, "Athènes et Ankara se disputent la mer Égée", *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 1996, p. 14-15

[7] KAFYEKE Chantal. « L'adhésion de la Turquie à l'Union européenne : enjeux et état du débat », *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, vol. 1933-1934, no. 28, 2006, pp. 5-72.

out of 35. Moreover, the end of the Cold War and the resolve of the two countries to reinvest in their regional environment and ensure its stability also fostered an unprecedented rapprochement at the turn of the millennium. Preceding the Turkish Neighbourhood Policy, which later became that of the AKP, the heads of Greek and Turkish diplomacy at the time, Georgios Papandreou and Ismail Cem, seized the opportunity of the mutual empathy created by the earthquakes that occurred almost simultaneously in their respective countries, to engage in close cooperation, particularly in the economic field.

These initiatives have been disappointing however. A divided Cyprus entered the European Union in 2004, despite the UN and EU efforts, which led to the first stumbling blocks in the negotiations with Turkey. As for Ahmet Davutoğlu's famous "zero problems with our neighbours" policy, it has been in the field of Greek-Turkish relations that the least convincing results have been achieved[8]. It was hoped that the first successful energy discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean would end the stalemate and encourage cooperation[9]. But the affirmation of the existence of a gas windfall in the zone has tended, on the contrary, to sharpen disagreements. After the failure of the last round of negotiations in 2017[10], Cyprus announced the exploitation of its deposits, while Turkey denounced a violation of the rights of Turkish Cypriots, with the launch of a gunboat policy to prevent this initiative and to conduct its own prospecting in disputed areas.

## THE PROTAGONISTS IN THE NEW GREAT GAME IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

As if to complicate matters, it must be said that Turkey, Cyprus and Greece are not the only protagonists in the new *great game* that is now emerging. Indeed, the first beneficiary of gas from the Eastern Mediterranean was Israel, with the discovery, in 2010, of the Tamar 2 and Leviathan gas fields,[11] which have made it an exporting country, now able to supply its former Egyptian supplier. After the location of the Cypriot *Aphrodite* field in 2011, it was not long before Egypt was served in its turn, whilst Zohr, the gas reserve considered to date to be the largest in the area, was identified in 2013[12]. However, the two new producers

have difficult relations with Turkey. Long regarded as its privileged ally in the Middle East, Israel has become the object of incessant criticism from Ankara, which aims to become the hero of the Palestinian cause in a divided Muslim world. As for Egypt, since President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, who were supported by Turkey, were overthrown by the army in 2013, the country has once again become the rival it was for the Turks in the 19th century, at the time of Mehmet Ali, or in the 20th century, during the Nasser period.

The discovery of gas has also led to a phenomenon of appropriation of the maritime areas in the Eastern Mediterranean, with the multiplication of declarations of *Exclusive Economic Zones* (EEZs) by the producer States. Hence, while the gas windfall reinforced a new strategic configuration of the Eastern Mediterranean, it has contributed to the isolation of Turkey[13]. In conflict with Israel at the time of the first hostilities between the Hebrew State and the Arab world, Greece and Cyprus have in fact continued to move closer to it since the first gas discoveries. After the signing of the *EastMed* gas pipeline project in January 2020,[14] these two EU Member States have believed they can help reduce Europe's dependence on Russian gas by allowing new supplies from Israel and Cyprus[15]. Egypt, for its part, also has strategic ambitions in this area. Liquefying its own gas and that of its Israeli neighbour for export purposes, among others, towards Europe, it is an unavoidable energy hub, rival to Turkey, but also to the Israeli-Greek *EastMed* gas pipeline.[16]. However, the construction of a gas pipeline between the Cypriot fields and the Egyptian liquefaction plants could resolve this nascent dispute[17]. More generally, Egypt intends to become the centre of gravity for cooperation between producer countries. Thus, in addition to the multiple tripartite summits it has regularly organised with Greece and Cyprus since 2013, it succeeded in setting up a gas forum in 2019 which brought together Greece, Cyprus, Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Italy, of which Turkey and Lebanon (which does not recognise the Hebrew State and contests its discoveries, etc.[18]), are not a part[19].

[8] MARCOU Jean, « La politique turque de voisinage », *EurOrient*, N°35-36, November 2011, p.163-180

[9] FURFARI, Samuele. « Le gaz naturel, nouvel élément structurant du Mare Nostrum », *Confluences Méditerranée*, vol. 91, n°4, 2014, pp. 67-82

[10] Bertrand, Gilles. « Chypre : trop de négociations ont-elles tué la négociation ? », *Confluences Méditerranée*, vol. 100, n°1, 2017, pp. 111-121

[11] VELILLA Philippe, "Israël et les nouveaux enjeux énergétiques en Méditerranée orientale", *Diplomatie*, n°105, p. 66-69

[12] MOURAD Hicham, "L'Égypte, nouveau hub énergétique régional", *Diplomatie*, n°105, p. 61-65

[13] ZAMAN Amberin, "Turkey grows increasingly isolated in Eastern Mediterranean dispute with Greece", *Al Monitor*, 13 August 2020

[14] RAFENBERG Marina, "EastMed, le projet de gazoduc destiné à contrer la Turquie", *Le Monde*, 3 January 2020 ;

KRASNA Joshua, "Israel, Greece Cyprus, take on Turkey in the Mediterranean", *Al Monitor*, 23 January 2020

[15] LITSAS Spyros N., "La Grèce en Méditerranée orientale : énergie diplomatie et perspectives à l'ère de la pandémie de covid-19", *Diplomatie*, n°105, p. 58-60

[16] MOURAD Hicham, "L'Égypte, nouveau hub énergétique régional", *Diplomatie*, n°105, p. 61-65 ; HOSNY Hagar, "Egypt unrefined by EastMed pipeline project", *Al Monitor*, 20 January 2020

[17] SAIED Mohamed, "Egypt. Cyprus focus on natural gas pipeline amid tensions in eastern Mediterranean", *Al Monitor*, 13 septembre 2020

[18] MEIER Daniel, "Les hydrocarbures du Liban : entre espoir et incertitudes", *Diplomatie*, n°105, p. 70-71

[19] SAIED Mohamed, "Is energy league an alliance against Ankara?", *Al Monitor*, 24 January 2019

## TURKEY MOTIVATED TO DEFEND "ITS BLUE HOMELAND"

Eastern Mediterranean gas geopolitics is in direct competition with Turkey's efforts to become the key link in Europe's southern gas supply corridor, through its involvement in the TANAP (2018) and TurkStream (2020) pipelines, which supply Caucasian and Russian gas respectively[20]. Moreover, the dimension of regional power acquired by Ankara has, in particular, led to multiple military interventions in Syria and to Turkish participation in the Astana process, alongside Russia and Iran. Finally, through the maritime appropriations that it is generating, this new configuration means that Turkey fears that it will be confined to its coasts and that a scenario, already experienced in the Aegean Sea, will be reproduced in the Eastern Mediterranean. Relying on the advantages of its emerging economic status, developing rapidly its military capabilities and permanent diplomatic activism, Turkey is now claiming not only access to the seas around it (Black Sea, Aegean Sea and Mediterranean Sea), but also the possibility of exploiting the wealth of these areas and exercising influence there. This aspiration is now frequently expressed by reference to the existence of a "blue homeland" (*mavi vatan*)[21]. Invented in 2006 by Rear Admiral Cem Gürdeniz to justify the development of Turkish naval forces and strengthen their capacity to intervene overseas (in the Gulf or in Africa, in particular)[22], this concept is now used by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to designate the maritime areas from which Turkey is said to have been unjustly deprived in its near abroad[23]!

It constituted the doctrine behind Turkey's intervention in Libya which resulted, in November 2019, in the signing of a treaty to delimit an EEZ with the Libyan government in Tripoli, then in the spring of 2020, in military intervention which helped to correct its compromised situation in the face of the forces of General Haftar, supported by the Sunni Arab countries allied to Saudi Arabia (Egypt, United Arab Emirates, etc.) and Russia. Turkey's intervention in Libya appears to be a response to its fears of becoming landlocked, since the maritime spaces that it hopes to obtain in this way would open a corridor between the Greek positions in the Aegean Sea and the gas fields of the

Eastern Mediterranean, but also because they ruin the chances of the EastMed gas pipeline that is to cross them. Greece tried to respond by defining, in August 2020, the borders of its EEZ with Egypt in areas that overlap with the Turkish-Libyan delimitation that had previously been in place.[24] But Athens is especially counting on Brussels to contain Turkey's ambitions.

## THE EUROPEAN UNION AND NATO WEAKENED ONCE AGAIN ON THEIR SOUTHERN FLANK

The fact remains that the Member States of the European Union are divided in their approach to and resolution of this crisis. France has resolutely chosen to support Greece, asking Brussels to take sanctions against Turkey, even sending Rafale aircraft and two naval vessels to Cyprus. France's involvement is the latest example of a confrontation between Ankara and Paris that has already been seen in several theatres of operations: Syria (with French support for the Kurdish YPG militia), Libya (where the two countries are not on the same side), Lebanon (where, after the explosion of 4 August 2020, Turkish diplomacy tried to overshadow the trips to Beirut by the French President Emmanuel Macron), Iraqi Kurdistan (whose regional government has difficulty in reconciling its relations with France and its ties with Turkey) and even, more recently, Mali (where the head of Turkish diplomacy made an ostensible visit after the *coup d'état* that overthrew President Keïta)[25]. In the Eastern Mediterranean, French engagement has aroused Turkey's wrath, which condemns a biased, even colonial posture[26]. The most recent episode of this Franco-Turkish rivalry opposed Emmanuel Macron and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in person, at the end of the MED7 summit, on 10 September in Corsica, the first having asked the countries of Southern Europe to be "hard on Turkey but not on the Turkish people who deserve better than Erdoğan" and the second having replied: "Mr Macron, you have not finished getting into trouble with me... don't quarrel with the Turkish people, don't quarrel with Turkey." [27]

Most Member States seem less willing to become directly involved in this tension. Germany, which is assuming the Presidency of the Council of the Union in the second half of 2020, seems to be particularly

[20]" Turkey becomes major East-West corridor: VP", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 1 January 2020;

"President Erdogan hails benefits of TANAP pipeline", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 1 May 2020

[21]For the official point of view on this idea, "The Blue homeland": Turkey's largest naval drills", *Anadolu Agency*, 27 February 2019

[22]Interview with retired Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, "Blue homeland shows Turkey has become a maritime power" *Hürriyet Daily News*, 4 March 2019

[23]MARCOU Jean, "La Turquie en Méditerranée orientale : des revendications énergétiques aux ambitions stratégiques", *Diplomatie*, n°105, p. 53-57

[24]MOURAD Mahmoud, "Egypt and Greece sign an agreement on exclusive economic zone", *Reuters*, 6 August 2020

[25]TASTEKIN Fehim, "Does France failure in Mali spell a victory for Turkey?", *Al Monitor*, 14 September 2020

[26]"Turkey slams Macron's arrogant statement with old colonial reflex", *Daily Sabah*, 10 September 2020

[27]"Le président turc Recep Tayyip Erdoğan menace Emmanuel Macron : 'Ne cherchez pas querelle à la Turquie'", *Le Monde*, 12 September 2020

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concerned about the management of its large Turkish community and about the concern of perpetuating the pact that the Union concluded with Ankara in 2016 to contain migratory surges triggered by the Syrian civil war and other causes of regional destabilisation (embargo on Iran, the Afghan conflict, etc.). Moreover, it again became evident during [the MED7](#), that the countries of southern Europe (Spain, Portugal, Italy, Malta) are trying to temper the fervour of Greece, Cyprus and France, which rose a notch with the announcement by Athens of the purchase of French military equipment, in particular [18 Rafale planes](#)[28]. Be that as it may, Turkey is trying to exploit the divisions within the European Union[29], by asking it to play the role of mediator, which prompted several visits by High Representative Josep Borrell[30], and similarly that of the head of German diplomacy, Heiko Maas mid-August 2020.

Although the Council of the Union initially hesitated in acceding to French requests for sanctions, it did not turn its back on calls for help from Greece and Cyprus either, especially when Ankara resumed prospecting in disputed areas in response to the Greek-Egyptian agreement on the delimitation of an EEZ. On 28 August 2020, the European Ministers of Foreign Affairs meeting in Berlin threatened Turkey *"with the establishment of a list of new restrictive measures"*[31]. This option is due to be debated at the next European Council on 24 and 25 September 2020. [Josep Borrell](#) mentioned serious sanctions that could go as far as banning Turkish ships from European ports. In a telephone conversation on 6 September 2020 with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, tried to delay the process, stating that the European Union could use the "carrot and stick" method, subjecting the taking of a number of European decisions in favour of Turkey (updating of the customs union agreement, lifting of visas for Turks travelling to the Schengen area, etc.) to the withdrawal of Turkish vessels prospecting in the disputed areas. This proposal was nevertheless greeted with scepticism by Turkish observers.[32]. On 16 September, [Charles Michel](#) expressed his full support to Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades. In her [speech on the State of the Union](#) on 16 September, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der

Leyen, described the path that Europe ought to take: *"refrain from acting unilaterally and resume dialogue in good faith, because this is the path that leads towards stability and long term solutions,"* whilst reassuring Greece and Cyprus of European solidarity.

NATO's situation is not much simpler. Tension between two of its members creates divisions within the Alliance that Turkey might be tempted to exploit.[33]. Anxious to safeguard its unity, its Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, recommended, at the beginning of September 2020, the opening of "technical talks" between the two protagonists, which have nevertheless been postponed several times. Greece has made the immediate withdrawal of Turkish prospecting vessels a condition for such negotiations, while Turkey, which says it is ready to negotiate without conditions, accuses its neighbour of undermining any attempt at dialogue. It is true that over the last few years, Ankara has become a problematic ally for the West, notably because of its rapprochement with Moscow and the purchase of Russian military equipment (notably S-400 defence missiles). However, recalling the historical complexity of France's relations with NATO and the recent remarks made by Emmanuel Macron deeming the latter to be "brain dead", Turkey has constantly reaffirmed its attachment to the Alliance by asking it to arbitrate the crisis. In any event, Ankara has remained an important ally for the United States, which uses the Incirlik base, including to stockpile nuclear weapons there and which did not appreciate France's military engagement alongside Greece. On the other hand, they welcomed Turkish support for the Fayed al-Sarraj government because this put a stop to Russia's ambitions in Libya. But the United States has remained very cautious in this crisis, which has also seen it partially lift an arms embargo on Cyprus dating back to 1974 and sign a framework agreement to open a naval base on the island of Aphrodite. It must be said that Serguei Lavrov, head of Russian diplomacy, recently travelled to Cyprus to offer his mediation.[34] and that Washington does not wish to see Moscow intervene in this conflict between two NATO members.

[28]SMOLAR Piotr & CHAPERON Isabelle, "La Grèce, premier pays européen à acheter le Rafale", *Le Monde* 13 September 2020

[29]Regarding this see the Turkey's official point of view : "A broken front: why Europe isn't united in the Eastern Mediterranean?", *TRT World*, 31 August 2020.

[30]CUPOLO Diego, "Rising EU-Turkey tensions take center stage with Borrell visit to Ankara", *AI Monitor*, 20 July 2020

[31]"Faute de progrès dans le dialogue avec la Grèce, en Méditerranée, l'UE se dit prête à sanctionner la Turquie", *Le Monde*, 29 August 2020

[32]DEMIRTAŞ Serkan, "EU's carrot-stick approach to Med crisis doomed to fail", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 7 September 2020

[33]ÇANDAR Cengiz, "Is Erdoğan trying to split NATO with his EastMed gambit?", *AI Monitor*, 28 August 2020

[34]"Russia offers to mediate any Cyprus-Turkey talks" *Reuters*, 8 September 2020

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The growing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean over the last few years therefore reflect a strategic reconfiguration that is far from being fully complete. This process, initially linked to the hydrocarbon discoveries made in the area and the resulting maritime appropriations, has been significantly transformed by the entry into the competition of Turkey, which now wants to be a key player. On the

fringes of an area constituting the southern flank of the European Union and NATO, this country, which feels badly accepted there, is playing a complex partition, combining the protection of its traditional Western alliances with an aspiration for autonomy and power. The resolution of the current crisis requires Europeans not only to take account of this new situation, but also to reflect on the relationship they want to establish in the longer term with their Turkish neighbour.

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