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# Why Turkey Is Raising the Stakes in the East Mediterranean

by [Soner Cagaptay](#)

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Brief Analysis

**Ankara is willing to take provocative and risky steps around Cyprus because it views the island's gas resources and strategic location as crucial to countering rivals and securing interests in the neighborhood.**

**O**n October 5, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with Greek foreign minister Nikos Dendias for the third time in less than three months. At a joint press conference following the meeting, Pompeo stated that Washington had warned Turkey against “illegal drilling” in the East Mediterranean and would make sure international laws are upheld on the matter.

The warning comes at a time when the Cyprus issue has once again become a sticking point for Ankara. The Turkish government and the internationally recognized Cypriot government have not had diplomatic ties since the 1974 war on the island, but the potential for military confrontation spiked in recent years after natural gas deposits were discovered off the shores of Cyprus. Ankara disputes the exploration licenses that Greek Cypriot authorities in Nicosia have granted to international energy companies in these areas, instead supporting exploration efforts by the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Turkey is the only country in the world to recognize the TRNC, which controls the northern portion of the island and is now working with Ankara to explore in southern waters where most of the deposits lie.

To reinforce the TRNC's position, Turkey has sent **drilling ships of its own and military vessels** to the gas fields, spurring condemnations from Greece, Cyprus, the EU (of which Athens and Nicosia are members), and regional gas players such as Israel and Egypt. In response, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has declared that Ankara will

“resolutely” continue these exploration efforts, even declaring no-go zones for Greek Cypriot vessels in local waters. The situation has led to confrontations between Turkish naval ships and exploration vessels contracted by the international energy companies to which Nicosia has granted licenses.

## **POWER PROJECTION GOALS AND MARITIME LAW**

**A**nkara’s provocative policy stems from its worries about being boxed in by rivals in the East Mediterranean, some old (Greece and Cyprus), some new (Israel and Egypt). Erdogan seemingly believes that he can undermine this supposed “anti-Turkish axis” by challenging maritime zones around its weakest link, Cyprus—an approach in keeping with his more offensive-minded foreign policy in the neighborhood (e.g., see his ongoing intervention in Syria). Unlike his predecessors, Erdogan feels empowered to pursue Turkey’s interests unilaterally, even at the price of regional isolation.

Beyond Erdogan, Turkey has longstanding military and strategic interests in asserting itself in the East Mediterranean. Its navy still lacks the ability to project power beyond its waters, leading many policymakers in Ankara to view Cyprus as an extension of Turkish maritime power into the Mediterranean. Furthermore, with relatively few energy resources of its own, Turkey relies on gas imports. Its total annual energy import bill is currently around \$30 billion, making it even more eager to explore gas opportunities around Cyprus.

Since Turkey does not recognize the Cypriot government in Nicosia as the head of a sovereign nation, it argues that the island is entitled to just twelve nautical miles of territorial waters, denying it the normal exclusive economic zone (EEZ) allotted to other nations, which typically extends much further. Turkey is not a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, so it does not formally recognize any continental shelf delimitations in the area besides the one it negotiated with the TRNC in 2011. Accordingly, it recognizes only the TRNC’s claimed EEZ, which includes a belt to the south of the island that does not abut the TRNC-controlled coastline. Based on this view, and with the TRNC’s consent, Turkey has proceeded with exploration, drilling, and potential extraction activities around much of the island.

## **A MEDITERRANEAN “AXIS”**

**B**eyond Cyprus, Ankara’s ties with key East Mediterranean actors Israel, Greece, and Egypt can hardly be described as friendly. Turkey and Israel reestablished formal ties in 2016 following the 2010 flotilla incident and subsequent diplomatic rupture, but Ankara’s backing of Hamas continues to undermine bilateral relations. Similarly, while Turkey and Greece are NATO allies and have come a long way since their past perch on the brink of war, they are not good friends.

Meanwhile, Turkish-Egyptian ties dipped to their lowest in decades in 2013, when Ankara supported the Muslim Brotherhood government in Cairo. Ever since that government was ousted by protestors and military officials, Erdogan has refused to recognize President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi as the country’s legitimate leader. Deep animosity persists between the two presidents, with Erdogan seen as the political Islamist who locked up secularist generals in Turkey, and Sisi as the secularist general who locked up political Islamists in Egypt. This state of affairs will likely prevent bilateral normalization anytime soon.

Given its cool-to-hostile relations with these states and Cyprus, Ankara has been alarmed by the rate at which they have come together in strategic cooperation in recent years, including joint diplomatic, energy, and military initiatives. Even a Persian Gulf player, the United Arab Emirates, has participated in some of these initiatives, fueled by its own vehement opposition to Erdogan’s region-wide support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Cairo is the key to many of these activities. Soon after coming to power, Sisi opened talks with Greece to delineate their maritime economic areas. And in November 2014, he held a three-way summit with his Cypriot and Greek counterparts to promote a deal supplying gas from Cypriot undersea fields to Egypt.

Cairo also hosted the inaugural meeting of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum this year. In addition to Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel, the group’s members include Jordan and the Palestinian Authority—with Turkey notably not invited.

On the military front, Cairo and Ankara had planned to hold joint naval maneuvers in the East Mediterranean during Morsi’s tenure, but the exercises were canceled following his ouster. In contrast, Egypt has been conducting joint air exercises with Greece in the area since 2015. The first of these, “Medusa,” was held on the Greek island of Rhodes just twelve miles from Turkey’s coast. Cypriot forces began participating in Medusa drills in 2018; separately, they carried out three rounds of joint exercises in Israel earlier this year.

Washington has largely backed such initiatives. The U.S. military participates in Medusa drills as an observer. And this March, following a meeting with representatives from Israel, Greece, and Cyprus, Secretary Pompeo underlined U.S. support for their trilateral mechanism to increase cooperation in the East Mediterranean. Then, in July, Senators Bob Menendez (D-NJ) and Marco Rubio (R-FL) introduced legislation outlining support for Cyprus and criticizing Turkey’s actions in local waters. That same month, U.S., Israeli, and Egyptian representatives participated in an energy summit in Athens, where Cypriot energy minister Georgios Lakkotrypis stated that “Ankara’s provocative attitude” would be the focus of discussions.

## CONCLUSION

Faced with this emerging bloc, and without allies of its own in the area, Turkey will likely continue asserting itself unilaterally in the East Mediterranean in order to pursue its energy and security interests, even at the price of further aggravating ties with Washington. The Turkish-Cypriot maritime dispute runs the risk of accidents involving their vessels or planes. Therefore, as U.S. officials build their agenda for Erdogan’s announced November 13 visit to Washington—an occasion that will be discussed at length in a separate PolicyWatch later this week, though media reports suggest Erdogan might cancel—they should urge Ankara to abandon provocative tactics toward Cyprus. They should also encourage regional powers to invite Ankara to participate in joint East Mediterranean initiatives as a way to defuse tensions and prevent conflict between U.S. regional partners.

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