

Erdogan, Cyprus and the Future of NATO

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*In recent weeks a dramatic escalation of tension around Turkish oil drilling rig presence in the disputed Exclusive Enterprise Zone surrounding EU member state Cyprus is taking place. Turkish **President Recep Tayyip Erdogan** is claiming that Turkey has the right to drill not only in the waters off of Northern Cyprus, but also in waters far from there where Greek Cyprus has claimed rights. The actions, moving Turkish oil and gas drilling platforms into the waters, is creating a dramatic new clash in the energy-rich Eastern Mediterranean. The line-up of actors makes for a political Molotov cocktail of clashing interests that potentially pits not only Turkey against Cyprus and Greece, but also Israel and the USA, with Russia and China watching with keen interest.*

On June 20, Turkey announced it was sending a second ship to waters off Cyprus to drill for oil and gas. It claims that it has maritime rights owing to its recognition of Turkish Cypriots in the Northeast part of the island facing Turkey. Since the island was divided in 1974, only Turkey has officially recognized Northern Cyprus, which calls itself the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus with some 36% of the island area. The rest of the island, known as the Republic of Cyprus, is recognized as a sovereign EU member state and is historically close to Greece. In July 2017 UN brokered talks on unifying the island broke down and energy tensions rose.

In 2011 vast oil and especially natural gas fields were discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean near Cyprus and as well off Israel, Lebanon and potentially Egypt. The entire region could contain more than 500 trillion cubic [feet of gas](#). The Eastern Mediterranean since then has become a focus of energy geopolitics and rising tension. When Cyprus granted drilling rights to ENI in February last year, Turkey sent warships to the area, forcing ENI to abandon its drilling. Then in November when Cyprus granted drilling rights in waters southwest of Cyprus to US major ExxonMobil, Erdogan demanded it be abandoned calling the company "pirates."

In recent weeks Erdogan has escalated the situation by sending several Turkish drilling ships to the waters claimed by the Republic of Cyprus.

Behind the scenes

What is behind the Turkish clear escalation now of its very much disputed claims to drill offshore Cyprus. Why now, over a matter which has been more or less known for more than eight years since large gas reserves were first found? There are several factors that could explain it.

First are the dramatic election defeats of Erdogan in recent months which, for the first time in more than a decade, have put his power in question. It cannot be ruled out that he sees playing tough over Turkish claims on Cyprus could revive his flagging popularity, especially

as the Turkish economy has entered a severe recession in recent months. With the growing political uncertainty, Turkey's economy is being hit with rising unemployment, collapsing domestic demand and a falling Lira. Erdogan is also in an ongoing fight with Washington over Ankara's insistence to buy Russia's advanced S-400 air defense systems rather than the US alternative. The fact that Turkey is a NATO country as is Greece adds to the geopolitical brew. On July 17 Washington announced that as a consequence of taking Russia's S-400 air defense systems, Turkey would not be allowed to purchase the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

Turkey and Russia

For years, especially since a failed July 2016 coup that Erdogan blamed on **Fethullah Gülen**, a CIA asset in exile in Pennsylvania, relations between Erdogan and Washington have been on edge as Washington refuses to extradite Gülen.

Now, after an earlier rupture on Turkish-Russian ties after a Turkish jet shot down a Russian plane inside Syrian airspace, **Russia is making major inroads in Turkey to the concern of Washington**. In addition to buying Russia's S-400 defense systems, Erdogan has joined Russia in construction of the TurkishStream gas pipeline from Russia's Black Sea to Turkey. In November, 2018 Russia's Putin went to Istanbul to celebrate completion of the first 910 kilometer undersea part of the gas pipeline as it reached Turkish land. A second parallel line would bring Russian gas via Turkey to Greece and potentially on to Serbia, Hungary and other European markets. Putin and Erdogan also held talks at the recent Osaka G20 summit discussing significant increases in mutual trade.

However, the recent Turkish moves to send drilling ships to Cyprus waters all but insures Greece will not agree to buy gas via Turkey's TurkStream source. Moreover, the fact that Turkey has placed its new Russian S-400 missile batteries in southwestern Turkey covering the airspace and territorial waters of Cyprus and Greece is not adding to [warm relations](#) with either Turkey or Russia from the side of Greece.

On July 16 as the EU announced sanctions on Turkey for its unauthorized drilling ships off Cyprus, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu responded: "Calling the EU's decision sanctions means taking it seriously. You shouldn't do that; the decision was made to satisfy Greek Cypriots. These things don't have any effect on us." As he spoke, Ankara announced sending a fourth exploration ship to the eastern Mediterranean. Not one to be modest, Erdogan's Foreign Minister claims Turkey has equal rights as the Greek Cyprus government to drill including waters 200 miles from the Cyprus coast, even asserting right to part of the Mediterranean that cuts into Greece's exclusive economic zone. It is supporting that with drones, F-16 fighters, and warships to escort the drilling ships it has [off Cyprus](#).

NATO Future

This all raises the question of whether Erdogan is going into a major new chapter of Turkish geopolitics and preparing to exit NATO in favor of the China-Russia-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Not only does Turkey seem to be willing to deepen its military ties with Moscow. In a recent trip to Beijing on July 2, Erdogan refused to criticize the Chinese for their alleged internment of more than 1 million ethnic Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang Province. Previously Turkey, which considers the Uyghurs ethnically Turks, referring to Xinjiang as East Turkestan, was one of

the only Muslim countries denouncing the Chinese treatment of Uyghurs. This time Erdogan surprisingly took a soft tone, telling media in China, "I believe we can find a solution to the issue taking into account the sensitivities of [both sides](#)." The clear purpose of the Erdogan Beijing trip was to gain economic support for Turkey's weakening economy, hard hit in recent months by US sanctions. Chinese companies are already engaged in construction of part of a new Istanbul-Ankara high-speed rail line as well as a new Istanbul airport.

Turkey has often played both sides, east and west, in an effort to win the best advantage. The question is whether now Erdogan is shifting towards a definite alliance with China and Russia, risking its status in NATO. If so, the current dispute over Cyprus oil and gas drilling could be a minor affair on the road to a geopolitical tectonic shift that would pose major challenges not just for the EU, but also for Washington.

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