

# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2020/21

Chief editor: Prof. Shaul Chorev

Edited and produced by: Ehud Gonen



  
אוניברסיטת חיפה  
University of Haifa  
جامعة حيفا

  
HMS

Maritime Policy & Strategy Research Centre  
המרכז לחקר מדיניות ואסטרטגיה ימית

## Section Two: Focus on Turkey

In view of the importance of Turkey and the role it is filling in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea, we chose to dedicate a separate chapter to Turkish maritime policy. Turkey today is, in a sense, the main challenge in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan whose worldview supports the Muslim Brotherhood and the Hamas, is changing Turkey's orientation from a Western one, moving it eastward, making it difficult for the European Union to accept it as a member, and threatening its relations with NATO, of which it is a member. A prominent sign of all this is Turkey's purchase of the S400 air defense system from Russia, despite the warnings of the American president. To the protracted dispute Turkey has with Cyprus and Greece has now been added a significant naval component – Cyprus' exclusive economic zone, which is rich in gas deposits. Turkey has opposed Cyprus' efforts to search for oil and gas in the disputed waters (see the references to NATO in the chapter on global developments).

Erdoğan heads the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which is basically undermining Atatürk's 1923 revolution. That revolution sought to transform Turkey from an eastern empire headed by a sultan who was an Islamic caliph into a modern democratic secular state. In addition to aligning itself with Russia at the cost of its relations with Europe and the US, Turkey opposed, at the beginning, the US request to its allies to stop importing Iranian crude oil. Later, however, Turkey acceded to the American request.

As part of its new policy toward the East, Turkey is developing, among others, a base in Doha, Qatar, a step that will allow Turkey to enter a small group of countries that are prepared and able to radiate power in the Persian Gulf. Erdoğan supports the Hamas' attacks on Israel. He regularly condemns Israel using antisemitic terms. Nevertheless, Israeli–Turkish trade and tourism are strong. Trade between the two countries grew by 130 million dollars in the first quarter of 2019. Travel by Israelis to Turkey in 2018 was 16% higher than the previous year. Turkey's military strength and power and its economic importance in the region, its process of reorientating itself toward the East, its distancing itself from NATO, its adoption of standards and norms that are not Western, and its regional activities, which are disruptive activities – are reasons for concern by the European states, and mandate continual monitoring and close coordination between the US and Israel.

## The Turkish Navy – Its strengthening process and operational doctrine

*Shlomo Guetta*

Over the past year, against the background of the adoption of the "Blue Homeland" doctrine and the nostalgia about the Ottoman Empire,<sup>1</sup> we have been witnessing relatively large-scale operations by the Turkish navy in different areas of the eastern Mediterranean Sea, the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea. Beyond the extensive operations in these seas, we can also see a Turkish trend to set up bases and establish maritime outposts in northern and eastern Africa and the Persian Gulf such as a naval base in the port of Misrata in Libya, a naval base in Qatar, a naval base in Somalia, and an unsuccessful attempt to establish a naval base in Sudan. Moreover, we note the obvious military presence including a naval presence in TRNC (Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus), in the northeastern part of the island of Cyprus, which is a Turkish protectorate.

Accordingly, it is worthwhile highlighting the present strength of the Turkish navy and its ongoing enlargement process, which today is at an advanced realization stage and that is expected to continue in the near term. The Turkish maritime component is becoming an significant factor that may eventually constitute a challenge for neighboring states in the eastern Mediterranean, including the state of Israel and its Navy.

### Historical background

The Turkish navy draws its heritage from the Ottoman navy that reached its pinnacle of power and achievements between the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Turkish people were originally 'men of the plains' but they recognized the importance of the maritime domain to their expansion and, therefore, the Turkish sultans very quickly drafted pirates who agreed to raise the Ottoman flag into their service to fight their maritime battles. During the height of

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1 Regarding the "Blue Homeland" doctrine and the President of Turkey's nostalgia about the country's Ottoman past, see the chapter herein by Omri Eilat and Ayal Hayut-Man, The Turkish maritime doctrine (Mavi Vatan). For more information about the main concept in the "Blue Homeland Doctrine", see footnote 4, below.

the navy's success, except for one rout at the Battle of Lepanto (October 1571),<sup>2</sup> the Turkish navy cast its shadow in different areas throughout the world, including being active in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Ottoman navy focused on the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the navy entered a period of stagnation while at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, a further deep-felt drop in the power of the Ottoman navy occurred and it even beseeched the help of the Ottoman Empire governor in Egypt—Muhammed Ali, both in the Red Sea region and in the Greek archipelago region.

Due to lack of space, we will not review all the milestones in the history of the Ottoman navy. We just note that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the navy suffered losses such as the Battle of Navarino, on the western shore of the Peloponnesian peninsula, in Greece, in 1827, when a joint Egyptian-Ottoman navy engaged the British, French and Russian navies. Later on, during the Egyptian battle to conquer the land of Israel, the Levant and Asia Minor, the Ottoman navy was captured when its commander surrendered at the Battle of Alexandria. Another loss to the joint Egyptian-Ottoman navy occurred during the Battle of Sinop in 1853, when it engaged the Russian navy in the Black Sea during the Crimean War.

Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Germany consented to rehabilitate the Ottoman army including its maritime component. During World War I, the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers, led by the German Empire, which extended maritime aid and advisors to the Ottoman army during the war. At the end of the war, despite the Turkish success in averting the allies landing during the Gallipoli campaign, the Ottoman Empire broke apart, and its imperial navy ceased to exist. In August 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres was signed with Turkey. Between 1919–1922, the Turkish "war of independence" was waged, led by Mustafa Kemal, a Turkish hero from the Gallipoli campaign.

We will not expand on the maritime aspects of the Turkish civil war, but only note that at the height of the war, on July 10, 1920, the foundations for the establishment of the modern Turkish navy were laid. About three years after this, in October 1923,

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2 The Battle of Lepanto was a large sea battle that took place on October 7, 1571 between the Christian "Holy League", comprising the united forces of Venice, Spain, and the Papal State, and the Turkish navy (the Ottoman Empire), near the Greek coastal city of Lepanto. This was the last major maritime battle in the history of naval warfare using rowing vessels. The engagement took place near the northern coast of the sea strait connecting the Gulf of Petras and the Gulf of Lepanto (today the Gulf of Corinth).

Mustafa Kemal (who then became known as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—*The father of the Turkish nation*) proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of Turkey.

During World War II, the Republic of Turkey remained neutral and postponed joining the Allies until February 1945. In 1950, Turkey sent armed forces to join the US in the Korean War, and as a result of this and also because of Turkey's strategic importance in controlling the Bosphorus and Dardanelle straits, it joined NATO in February 1952. Since then and up until today, it has been and continues to be part of the NATO fleet, alongside the Greek navy, its longstanding traditional enemy.

An additional important milestone relating to the Turkish navy in the modern era, worth mentioning in this brief historical recap, is its involvement in Turkey's invasion of the island of Cyprus and conquest of one third of the island during July–August 1974. One year after this, the Turks announced the establishment of the federal Turkish state of Cyprus, which became the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus eight years later. This state, recognized only by Turkey and operating as its vassal state, later on influences, as reviewed below, the present-day processes in the context of economic waters that Turkey perceives as belonging to it.

### **The strengthening and building up of the Turkish navy since World War II<sup>3</sup>**

A special position, in the eyes of the US and NATO member states, was accorded to Turkey and its maritime strength when it joined NATO in 1952, as well as to its strategic location, both as a state adjacent to the USSR and as the one controlling the Bosphorus and Dardanelle straits, which comprise the main Russian passageway between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, which had special significance during the years of the Cold War.

This special position gave Turkey preference on the part of the western bloc and its navy was allowed to join the NATO fleet during joint exercises and was helped to build its strength, under relaxed conditions extended by the western countries and the US. The build-up of the Turkish maritime power during most of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by the clear majority of the vessels acquired by the Turkish navy (both vessels and submarines) being used vessels, previously owned by Western fleets, especially the US navy, as well as western European countries such as Britain, France, and the then-West Germany.

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3 This section is based, among others, on selected Jane's Fighting Ships annuals, segmented by year, e.g., 73/74, 74/75, 86/87, 79/80, as well as a digital edition from 2019.

As will be discussed below, during the process of building up its navy in the closing years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the past two decades, Turkey stressed independent building capabilities. Turkey's ability to build advanced submarines and surface vessels on its own is essentially the result of close and special contacts between it and Germany in the maritime field. This ability boosts Turkey's reputation, allows it to purchase knowledge and enables it to develop employment and training options for local human resources. Germany, on its part, sees Turkey as an equal member of NATO and, therefore, has no issues with sharing the best of its technology and knowledge to give Turkey independent ability.

During the last two decades, more exactly from 2007,<sup>4</sup> the quantum leap in terms of the boost to Turkish maritime strength is particularly prominent. The Turkish government began investing resources, increasing expenses significantly in an effort to develop independent construction capabilities regarding various platforms for its navy. Ankara not only increased the number of its vessels and war ships, but also achieved the ability to build maritime platforms independently, such as some of its weapon systems and the weapons for them, basing their development on local R&D. The purpose here was to reduce their dependence on external purchasing sources.<sup>5</sup>

According to a survey conducted by one of the leading nongovernmental associations in the country's security industry, since 2007, R&D expenditures tripled and totaled more than 1.2 billion dollars in the 2019 financial year. This dramatic increase in capital investment created a number of projects intended mainly to increase the Turkish navy.<sup>6</sup> In the following survey of the maritime build-up, we will focus on three components of strength: submarines, surface vessels and landing force systems, and to a certain extent, on the independent development of the range of armaments and aircraft for maritime missions.

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4 It is interesting to note that the seeds of the "Blue Homeland" doctrine began developing in the philosophy of General Gerondiz, the father of the doctrine, in 2006, a year before resources were allocated for the new maritime strengthening program. It would appear that the close proximity time-wise is no coincidence, given that realization of the doctrine alongside aspirations to be a regional maritime power, means large investments in the navy's strengthening process are needed.

5 See the paper in the Turkish journal TRT. <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-turkey-became-a-strong-naval-power-in-recent-years-32670>

6 See the paper by Prof. Ryan Gingeras, of the National Security Department of the Turkish Naval College, from 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/the-turkish-navy-in-an-era-of-great-power-competition>; and the December 2019 paper by Asa Ophir, a Turkish analyst. <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/he/node/41305>

## The submarine component

The first kernel of submarine strength in Turkey began to take shape with the help of the German Empire toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Following World War I and the establishment of the new navy of the Republic of Turkey, old submarines, surplus from the German navy after the war, were acquired. Later, during the first half of the 1930s, submarines made in Italy, and in the second half of the same decade, submarines made in Nazi Germany, were acquired.

In the 1940s, at the end of World War II and afterwards, Turkey purchased 12 S<sup>7</sup> class submarines from Britain, which were called Oruc Reis in Turkey. S type submarines were phased out a long ago—some in the 1950s and most by the beginning of the 1970s. In parallel with the purchase from Britain (but not simultaneously), about 20 used and surplus Balao class submarines were purchased from the US navy after World War II. The last ones of this class were purchased in the 1970s and taken out of service at the end of the 1990s. Other surplus US navy submarines were acquired at the beginning of the 1970s, and at the beginning of the 1980s, Tang and Tech class submarines were acquired. These submarines were phased out of the Turkish navy by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

After acquiring the US navy's used submarines, the used submarine era of the Turkish navy was over and it began purchasing and integrating new German made submarines (then West Germany). Its first six submarines were 209/1200 class (called Atilay class in the Turkish navy) boats, whose construction began in the mid-1970s and continued through the 1980s. Three of them were constructed in the HDW shipyards in Kiel, Germany, and the other three were constructed under German license in the Turkish navy shipyards at Golcuk.

Four more advanced T1 209/1400 class (called Prevez class in the Turkish navy) submarines were all constructed in the Turkish navy shipyards at Golcuk during the latter half of the 1990s.

To summarize, the process of strengthening the Turkish navy through submarines during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be said to be characterized by a number of significant advances. In the beginning, used British and US surplus submarines from were acquired; following this, new submarines were built in Germany; and afterwards, in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the navy advanced to constructing submarines on its own, under license from Germany.

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7 The Israeli navy also purchased two submarines of this type from Britain at the end of the 1950s (the Rahav and Tanin submarines).



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Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all the used submarines sold to the Turkish navy by the British and US navies were phased out. Accordingly, at the beginning of the new century, the Turkish navy was using newly constructed submarines that were manufactured either in Germany or in Turkey itself.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can point to another advance. In the first decade of the present century, four additional submarines were built in Turkey. These were more advanced than the earlier ones and were constructed on behalf of the ThyssenKrupp AG company of Germany. These were T2 209/1400 class boats (called Gur class in the Turkish navy).

The jewel in the crown in this area is happening and coming to fruition in the present decade, and this is the independent construction of six advanced type 214 submarines, which have an AIP type<sup>8</sup> propulsion system. This new and advanced class is called the Reis class in Turkey. The first submarine in this series was launched in December 2019, with the rest of the group planned to be completed by 2027.

Up to the time this paper was being written, it seemed that the Turkish navy was slated to have a fleet of 10–12 209 class submarines (with all their assorted variations), and to this must be added the future addition of six 214 class (Reis class in Turkey) submarines. Thus, after the new submarines join the navy and in parallel with the phasing out of the outdated Atılay class submarines, it is expected that the Turkish navy will continue to have 12–14 advanced submarines at its disposal. This quantity gives the Turkish navy an advantage in the balance of power vis-à-vis submarines in the eastern Mediterranean compared to Greece, Egypt and Israel.

As noted above, the design of most of the existing and planned submarines is Turkish, but based on German knowledge and design, which necessitates an ability to develop and train professional human resources (engineers, marine architects and the like), both for the actual construction and for the ongoing basic maintenance. This ability to construct submarines independently is not something trivial, despite the German knowledge and design. For comparison purposes, we note that Israel and Egypt, which all have an important submarine component in their defense program, do not have this independent ability.

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8 AIP – air-independent propulsion



## Strengthening of front-line surface vessels<sup>9</sup> since World War I

In this field also, the strengthening of the Turkish navy's surface vessels was, from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, based on acquiring surplus destroyers and frigates from the British and US navies, with a few surplus ships from the then-West German navy. These secondhand vessels were phased out of the Turkish navy by the end of the last century or the beginning of the present one. Some, as, for example, the Gearing destroyer manufactured in the US, were upgraded and armed with sea-to-sea Harpoon missiles.

Alongside purchase of the used vessels, it must be noted that at the beginning of the 1970s, the Turks began building Berk class frigates, based on an American model, at the navy shipyards at Golcuk. Likewise, in this same decade they began building 57 class missile boats at the Taskizak shipyards in Istanbul, based on knowledge from the Lurssen shipyards in West Germany. These ships were armed with, among others, Harpoon sea-to-sea missiles.

Independent construction of surface vessels in Turkey opened the way for more advanced models, this time also with close and special cooperation of the West Germans. During the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, six German-licensed Meko 200 class missile frigates were built for Turkey (Yavuz and Barbaros classes in Turkey)—three in Germany and three at the Golcuk shipyards in Turkey, and all armed with, among others, Harpoon sea-to-sea missiles.

In the 1990s, the practice of purchasing surplus frigates and missile destroyers manufactured in the US reappeared. This time the Turkish navy acquired about 10 Knox class and eight OHP class ships, both armed with Harpoon sea-to-sea missiles. The latter class can also carry sea helicopters.<sup>10</sup>

To summarize the Turkish navy's various trends in strengthening its surface vessel fleet in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we should also note that here too significant advances characterized the process. In the beginning, there was complete dependence on surplus from western navies, after which processes of independent manufacturing and construction in Turkish shipyards began, including the building of missile boats and missile frigates.

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9 Armed surface vessels and the ability to engage in attack missions in the open water beyond the territorial waters, in contrast to surface vessels intended to protect the shore and ports within the territorial waters of a respective country.

10 It should be noted that the KNOX and OHP classes were also supplied in the 1990s, after the First Gulf War, to the Egyptian navy.

Different from the submarine component, where the Turkish navy stopped acquiring used boats, here at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Turkish navy went back to acquiring surplus US surface vessels. Nevertheless, this time these were improved models that included being armed with advanced sea-to-sea and air-to-sea missiles.

Further, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, during 2001–2002, the Turkish navy acquired six A-69 class missile corvettes (also anti-submarine), which had been built back in the 1970s for the French navy. The corvettes were armed with Exocet sea-to-sea missiles, and still serve in the Turkish navy.

In 2008 in the Istanbul shipyards, construction of a set of 16 patrol boats began. These boats were about 57 meters long and armed with cannons and anti-submarine weaponry. In Turkey, they are called Tuzla class. These boats went into service in the Turkish navy between 2011–2015.

The jewel in the crown of independent Turkish surface vessel construction in the last decade was a set of missile frigates, built as part of the MILGEM project. Their construction began in 2007, which as will be recalled is the turning-point year in the process of strengthening the Turkish navy in the modern era. At this point, it is known that four of these frigates have been integrated into the Turkish navy (hull numbers F511–514), armed with Harpoon class sea-to-sea missiles.

It is noted that as part of a collaboration with the Pakistani navy, four MILGEM class frigates will be built for it—half will be built in Istanbul and half in Karachi, Pakistan, itself. The first frigate of this set will be handed over to Pakistan during 2023.<sup>11</sup>

## Landing forces and amphibious vessels

Turkey has always placed great importance on having the ability to land forces from the sea. The need for this capability, in Turkey's view, is rooted in the potential requirement to get involved in disputed areas. This capability was indeed tested in the middle of the 1970s when the Turkey invaded Northern Cyprus.

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a large number of assorted ships and boats were integrated into the Turkish navy. Some of these were surplus from the US navy and some were built by Turkey itself. Of these, we can count four large American tank landing ships (LSTs) that were handed over at the beginning of the 1970s. Later on, after the invasion of Cyprus and up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, five large landing ships, similar in size, were built in the navy shipyards at Taskizak.

11 Firat Tasdemir 25.10.2020.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/turkish-naval-ship-to-be-sledged-in-pakistan/2018166>

Besides the large landing ships used by the Turkish navy, it also used tens of smaller landing boats (LCU, LCT and LCM types). Almost all of these were constructed in Turkey, beginning in the mid-1960s. One class that was built in Turkey was based on the French EDIC model.

In the present strengthening program, besides from the existing two large projects for building advanced 214 class submarines (the MILDEN project) and missile frigates (the MILGEM project), a flagship project has been pending since the middle of the present decade—the building of a light aircraft carrier that will have amphibious capabilities.

The construction of the first vessel of this class, called in Turkey the TCG Anadolu L-408, began in the Istanbul shipyards in the second half of the present decade as part of a joint consortium that included the Navantia shipyards in Spain. This vessel is defined as an amphibious assault ship, about 230 meters long, with a maximum displacement of about 27 thousand tons and maximum range of about 9,000 miles. This project is based on the Spanish "Juan Carlos" (L-61) model. The ship has a range of carrying configurations—airplanes, helicopters, UAVs and even LCM/LCAC landing crafts.

At present, it is unclear which type of airplane it will carry. Originally, it was planned to carry 12 US manufactured vertical take-off and landing F-35B aircraft, but because Turkey purchases anti-aircraft missiles from Russia, difficulties have arisen in the past year regarding the deal between the US and Turkey.

Last year, Turkey's intention to build an additional aircraft carrier of the same type was disclosed. This would be an identical sister ship to the one described above and to be called the TCG Trakya. It is now being designed by the Turkish navy. This aircraft carrier model has a very important place in the strengthening of the Turkish navy program, and it allows the Turkish state to finally join the aircraft carrier club.

Richard Parle, an American researcher who writes about and studies the military, estimates that the aircraft carrier Anadolu will enable the Turkish navy "unprecedented amphibious assault ability in the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean." As far as Turkey's amphibious abilities, we note the establishment of a marine brigade subordinate to the navy. This is in addition to the existence of the navy's SAT marine commando unit. It is estimated that the special units are highly trained and we point out that in the past they had a not small part in the 1974 summer invasion of Cyprus.

### *The marine invasion of Cyprus (Operation Atilla)*

At the time of Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in the summer of 1974, its navy had not insignificant capabilities including a marine force, in order for it to integrate into the other army branches, in the planning and executing of the invasion. In the early hours of July 20, 1974, the Turkish marine landing on the Pentemili coast began, using about 22 ships and landing boats, and accompanied by seven aircraft carriers and gunboats.



Figure 1: Map of the landing and movement of the Turkish forces up to Nicosia, the capital



Figure 2: The landing strip on the Pentemili coast

The marine part of the invasion of Cyprus was, from the Turkish navy's perspective, the jewel in the crown of its actions, and a significant milestone in the operations of the Turkish navy as an important component of Turkey's security strategy, a component whose importance continues to grow in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as will be explained below.

## Independent development of naval weapon systems

As part of the new strengthening program, from 2007 emphasis has also been put on domestic development and production of naval systems, which area is led by the ROKETSAN company<sup>12</sup> in Turkey. The company developed a line of armaments, and in the naval field, the jewel in the crown is the ATMACA anti-ship cruise missile with a planned effective firing range of between 280 and 360 km.

In the middle of 2020, a successful trial of the missile launched from a ground silo was held and, according to developers, it hit its target, more than 200 km away, exactly. The missile is supposed to become operational this year; mass production of the missile is expected to begin and it will gradually replace the US manufactured Harpoon missile in the range of new surface vessels under construction such as the MILGEM model frigate, and the possibility that the new submarines will also be outfitted with this missile should not be dismissed.

## Naval air force

According to up-to-date information for 2020, the Turkish navy has at its disposal about 40 aircraft designed for naval missions, of which about 15 are fixed-wing airplanes and the remainder are helicopters. The various aircraft, including UAVs, are used for patrolling and identifying naval targets. From the assault side, it seems that at this stage, the helicopters are armed with anti-submarine torpedoes, as well as anti-tank missiles manufactured locally that have been modified to hit maritime targets.

We can estimate that the over-the-sea assault threat from airborne platforms will increase the more light aircraft carriers are brought into operational service and the appropriate aircraft, able to launch cruise missiles against maritime targets (e.g., the locally manufactured ATMACA) are purchased for them.

## Summary of the characteristics of the strengthening of the Turkish navy

As we saw, all the navy's power components were, at the beginning, based on the surplus platforms of western navies. Following this, a clear and consistent trend of developing the ability for independent construction and manufacturing of both sailing vessels including submarines and naval weapon systems developed. A small part of the independent abilities was acquired in the US and Spain; however, the central capabilities and the construction licenses were based on German knowledge,

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12 A company equivalent to Rafael in Israel.

the result of close and special collaboration in the maritime area between the two countries.

The Turkish aspiration to be self-sufficient stems from a number of motives. First and foremost, there is the desire to attain the image and reputation befitting a state that sees itself as a regional maritime power. Moreover, there are considerations about reducing dependence on external supply sources, and of course, there is the economic consideration for creating jobs for local industry.

In a special way, and different than other navies that challenge the Turkish navy (e.g., the Greek, Egyptian and Israeli navies), we note the impressive ability, albeit based on foreign knowledge, to build advanced submarines, multipurpose frigates and light aircraft carriers. This is certainly a quantum leap characterizing the process of building up the strength of the Turkish navy in the last decade.

### The operational doctrine of the Turkish navy

*"The existence of a strong and capable navy is essential for the protection of Turkey. Our navy will strongly support our policies."*

The above quote comes from a speech made by the founder of the modern Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to officers on a patrol boat making its maiden voyage in the Black Sea in September 1924.<sup>13</sup>

During the time when Admiral Bülent Bostanoğlu served as the commander of the Turkish navy (2013–2017), he prepared and published, in 2016, the strategy of the Turkish navy. The opening words of the publication were: "The one who rules the seas, rules the world."<sup>14</sup>

In the introduction to the first edition of this paper, Admiral Bostanoğlu spoke of Turkey's significant geopolitical position and location as an Afro-Eurasian state, having many areas of interest in the maritime domain, and especially in the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea. He emphasized the disputes still existing about the territorial water borders in the eastern Mediterranean, including the dispute related to Cyprus, and the imbalance in the Aegean Sea as decided upon in the Treaty of Lausanne. In the same introduction, he said that the maritime domain has become very important, especially in terms of energy exploitation as well as

13 From the official publication of the Turkish navy: Turkish Naval Forces Strategy, 2016, page 26, footnote 61. See the following link:

<https://www.dzkk.tsk.tr/data/icerik/392/Turkish%20Naval%20Forces%20Strategy.pdf>

14 Ibid., page 4.

natural resources, and he noted that this subject has been a cause for increasing competition between states seeking to generate benefits from these resources. The competition has exacerbated even more the arguments about territorial water borders.<sup>15</sup>

The Turkish navy strategy document indeed continues to espouse the Turkish commitment to international institutions such as the UN and NATO, for example, in everything related to securing international commercial shipping lanes, as well as the battle against sea pirates. Nevertheless, the strategy document emphasizes that: "it is imperative to maintain a strong navy to protect Turkey," in the spirit of Atatürk, while preserving the ability to act in the open sea and use deterrent force in the face of threats and dangers".<sup>16</sup>

And indeed, since the formulation of this strategic document, there has been a change in Turkey's maritime strategy. No longer is the Turkish navy only a part of the NATO navy; it is, rather, the navy of a regional power characterized by features that can be categorized as a "green-water" navy or at least as one that is advancing and aspiring to be a "green-water" navy. This would be a navy that, obviously, would have a clear presence in the Black Sea, the eastern Mediterranean Sea, and the Aegean Sea, and will have the potential to operate in additional areas such as in the Adriatic Sea, the Gulf of Sirte in Libya, the Persian Gulf and the southern Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

The strategic document was made public in 2016, during the tenure of the present president, Erdogan, but it is not completely clear, however, that today he would have supported this document because in the spirit of Atatürk's philosophy, the document expresses and emphasizes the goals related to balance of power in the maritime domain and does not express motifs of return to the 'Ottoman Empire's former glory', and pan-Islamic motifs such as Erdogan champions today.

In contrast, the father of the "Blue Homeland" doctrine, Admiral Cem Gurdeniz, would certainly support the document and it may be that the document was inspired by him. Recently, he said that the "Blue Homeland" doctrine focuses on a "geopolitical struggle surrounding maritime interests with military, economic, technological, sociocultural and environmental aspects." According to his philosophy, the maritime domain is an inexhaustible source of wealth and power. The 21<sup>st</sup> century, in his opinion, will be the century of the sea for the entire globe. Humanity will be totally

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15 Ibid., page 3.

16 Ibid., page 41.



dependent on the sea, in terms of transportation, energy and food, as it has never ever been.<sup>17</sup>

### And from theory to practice

In March 2019, Turkey held one of its largest navel exercises ever, with the participation of over 100 sailing vessels. The exercise was held in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the eastern Mediterranean Sea, and was called, obviously, "Blue Homeland". Approximately two months after, in the second half of March 2019, another naval exercise, even bigger than before, was held under the command of the Turkish navy and in which over 130 warships and about 90 aircraft participated. This exercise was called "Sea-Wolf" and it also was held in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the eastern Mediterranean Sea.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 3: The Turkish navy on maneuvers (September 2014)<sup>19</sup>

- 17 The main points made by Gurdeniz were said in an interview on the Turkish television network, Ulusal Kanal, on December 22, 2019.
- 18 Based on a paper posted on TRT World. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkish-naval-strength-in-eastern-mediterranean-shifts-balance-of-power-37730/amp>
- 19 The photograph was taken from the website of the Nordic Monitor. <https://www.nordicmonitor.com/2020/02/erdogans-secret-keeper-says-lausanne-treaty-invalid-turkey-free-to-grab-resources>

A further real-life demonstration of the Turkish sea operations doctrine can be seen in the bilateral memorandum of understanding that was signed in November 2019 between Turkey and the government of Libya, which rules the western part of the divided country (the General National Congress – GNA), in the center of which sits Tripoli. According to the memorandum, a joint Turkish–Libyan exclusive economic zone (EEZ) was arbitrarily fixed. Understandably, this heightened tensions in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, Turkey began getting involved in the Libyan civil war by giving support to the Libyan government in Tripoli, in opposition to the regime of Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya, whose center is in the city of Benghazi. This involvement raised the tension between Turkey and Egypt because the latter country, together with the Emirates, supports Haftar’s regime.

In parallel with its involvement in Libya, in 2020 Turkey took steps to demonstrate its presence and conduct geological surveys and search for gas reserves in Greece’s and Cyprus’ recognized EEZs.

In Libya, especially in the western part of the Gulf of Sidra, in the traditional hotspots of the islands in the Aegean Sea and in the territorial water of Greece and Cyprus—in all of these places, the Turkish navy made sure its presence was noted, sometimes aggressively, among others by escorting and guarding using frigates, ships that undertook surveys and drilling in the sea domains of Cyprus and Crete. Likewise, the Turkish navy operated in the coastal region of Libya, in the western part of the Gulf of Sidra, using frigates and apparently also submarines.



Figure 4: Frigates belonging to the Turkish navy guarding the activities of the survey ship Oruç Reis<sup>20</sup>

20 See the following link. <https://ahval.me/east-med/turkey-plans-new-drilling-coast-cyprus-report>

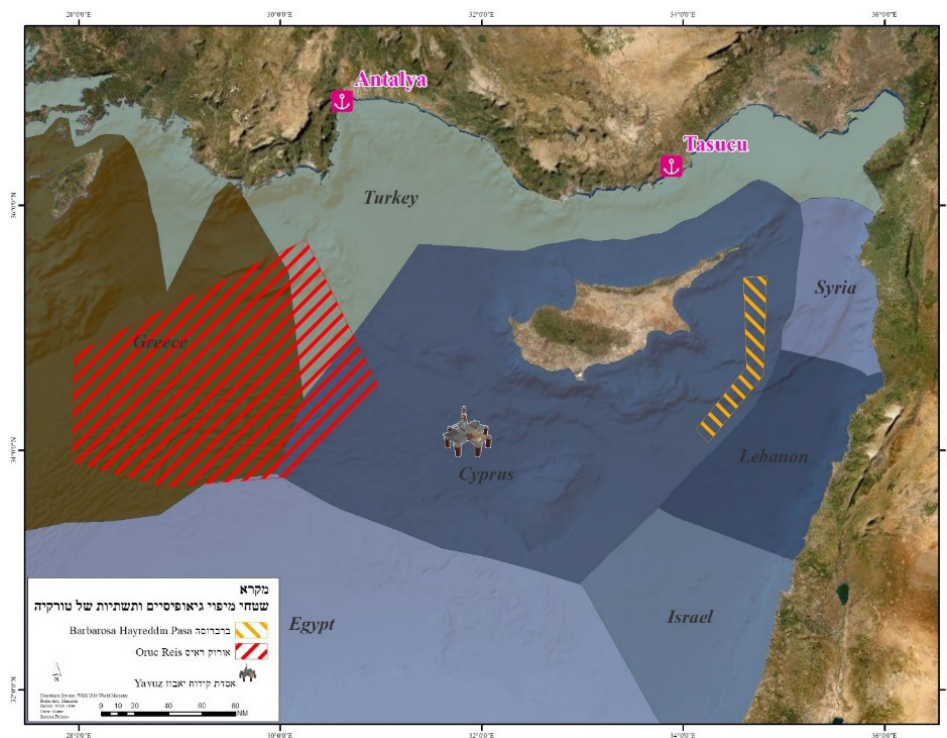


Figure 5: Seismic surveys conducted by Turkey in 2020 in the economic zones of Cyprus and Greece<sup>21</sup>

## Summary

Over the past two decades, the Turkish navy changed how it looks and its strength. This change derives from the formulation of a maritime strategy intended to transform it from a navy that is part of the NATO fleet into a navy that exemplifies a regional maritime power. Turkey's maritime strategy in the present is influenced by both the vision of a return to the glory days of the Ottoman Empire and the adoption of the "Blue Homeland" doctrine, which sees in the maritime domain an economic resource, and in concrete terms, an inexhaustible source of natural gas reservoirs, which Turkey, similar to its neighbors, some of whom are also its competitors, desires for its economic security.

To these narratives, we must add geographic implications. Turkey controls two important sea straits, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, the only points of entry

21 See the paper by Semion Polinov and Shlomo Gueta.

<https://ch-strategy.hevra.haifa.ac.il/index.php/turkey-marine-geophysical-surveys>

and exit from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean and vice versa. From the end of World War II through the years of the Cold War, the two superpowers, the US and the USSR (which eventually became Russia), were keenly aware of this basic geographic fact.

The strength components as reviewed, during the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially since the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, expressly convey Turkey's aspirations to transform its navy into a "green-water navy", i.e., a navy with the ability to operate far from its home ports while being supported by and based in friendly ports. In the opinion of the author of this paper, the Turkish navy, in its present form, and certainly as the program for strengthening it over the coming years is deployed, will be a navy that should be related to as a "green-water navy", and as belonging to a regional power.

In terms of becoming a maritime force to be reckoned with, we note the Turkish diligence and aspiration, since the middle of the past century and more intensely in the past two decades, to outfit itself with maritime platforms, and its domestic construction and assembly facilities in Turkish shipyards, including submarines, frigates and corvettes, and recently, light aircraft carriers. It is worth noting the fact that Turkey is today a source of new sailing vessels for the Pakistan navy. The Turkish ability to independently develop and manufacture can be seen in its equipping itself with naval weapons, the crowning jewel of which is the development and manufacturing of a new long-range anti-ship cruise missile, the ATMACA, which in the future will replace the Harpoon missile series made by the US.

The Turkish navy today is the strongest navy among all the navies in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Obviously, this statement does not take into account the Russian navy and the US Sixth Fleet, which has in any event lately been reducing its presence in our region.

On the operational side, it seems that the Turkish navy still does not have proven operational experience. Nevertheless, it has accumulated thousands of hours of exercises with some of the NATO navies, and especially with the US navy. One can assume that the series of broad naval exercises conducted by the Turkish navy since 2019, as well as the many actions carried out by the navy in 2020 in the eastern Mediterranean (as part of protecting drilling ships and seismic survey ships), as well as the naval operations focusing on Libya—have certainly contributed to its operational capability.

We can say that Turkey's naval strength constitutes a challenge and a threat to its traditional adversaries in the area, and especially to Greece and Egypt following the rise of A-Sisi to the latter country's government. Alongside this, the assumption now is that also Israel must take into consideration the potential maritime threat that may arise from the Turkish navy. In this context, it is worth remembering the significant event that occurred at the end of May 2010—the thwarting of the flotilla to Gaza, which flotilla included, among others, the Mavi Marmara, as well as the more recent event, in December 2019, when Turkish navy ships forced the 'Bat Galim', an Israeli research ship, out of Cypriot waters. The ship, which belongs to the Israel Oceanographic and Limnological Research Institute, subordinate to the Ministry of Energy, was conducting research in the economic waters of Cyprus, with the permission of the government of Cyprus.



Figure 6: Turkish frigate on a joint exercise with the USS Harry Truman, an aircraft carrier<sup>22</sup>

22 The photograph was taken from the following paper. <https://www.mako.co.il/pzm-magazine/Article-f4a618e41983231006.htm?Partner=interlink>



Turkey's economic interests in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, the 'megalomania' of the present government seeking to return to the glory of the Ottoman Empire, as well as its basic enmity toward Israel, and the unconditional preference and support of the Palestinian nation—all position Turkey and its naval component as potential threats to and future challenges for Israel.

The State of Israel, being a country that is unequivocally and crucially dependent on its maritime trade, cannot watch unconcernedly the potential threat of the Turkish navy, which may give a show of strength and bring to bear high quality multipurpose surface sailing ships, as well as the impressive power of advanced assault submarines.

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## The Turkish Maritime Doctrine – The ‘Blue Homeland’ (Mavi Vatan)

### *Omri Eilat, Ayal Hayut-Man*

Since mid-2019, the Turkish navy has significantly expanded its activity in the Mediterranean. Among other things, ships of the Turkish navy have disrupted drilling and research activities in Cyprus’ EEZ and have engaged in such activities themselves; they have harassed Greece’s ships and since July 2020 have also demonstrated a presence off the Greek islands; and significant presence off the shores of Libya and have even provoked a confrontation with a French ship in that region. In March and May 2019, Turkey held two large-scale naval exercises, among the largest in its history. The first, which was called the ‘Blue Homeland’ (Mavi Vatan), took place in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean and involved more than 100 vessels. The second, which was called ‘Sea Wolf’ (Denizkurdu), took place in those same regions and included more than 130 ships and about 90 aircraft. These exercises included, among other things, a simulation of capturing islands—apparently Greek islands—and a confrontation with F16 planes, which are possessed in the East Mediterranean region only by Greece, Israel, and Egypt. These moves reflect Turkey’s new strategy, one put in place by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This is part of the strategic change in course that began more than a decade ago when Turkey decided to become a hegemonic power in the Middle East. The Turkish strategy includes activist principles of geopolitical and economic expansion, alongside defensive principles that were intended to rectify a historical injustice (in Turkey’s eyes) committed against the Turkish homeland by the international community. The strategic plan that dictates Turkey’s actions is called the ‘Blue Homeland.’ This is a doctrine that was first presented in 2006 by Turkish Admiral Cem Gürdeniz at a symposium held at the Turkish naval headquarters. According to the ‘Blue Homeland’, Turkey has the right to an enlarged maritime territory, measuring about 460 thousand square km, in the Mediterranean, the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea. This territory includes areas that are recognized as belonging to Greece and Cyprus EEZ’s according to international conventions.

The disagreement centers around the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), in which a coastal nation has the right to exploit natural resources such as oil, natural gas and fisheries. According to the UN Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), each country has the right to an EEZ of up to 200 nautical miles from its coast. This convention also defines the means and methods for delimiting the EEZ in cases where two countries have a claim on the same area. The main dispute between Turkey



and Greece concerning their EEZs is based on the fact that Greece has numerous islands, some of which border on Turkey, and according to the convention, every inhabitable island provides the right to the EEZ surrounding it. According to Turkey, islands should not be counted in determining the boundaries of an EEZ.

The historical position of Turkey, which is not exclusively due to the policy of the Erdoğan regime, is that the Convention for the Law of the Sea, which includes inhabitable islands in the delimitation of an EEZ, discriminates against Turkey by its very nature. The logic behind Turkish demands not to recognize the islands is related to Greece's control of the Cyclades, which extend all the way to the Turkish coast and is the result of the distortion that this situation creates given the dictates of the Convention for the Law of the Sea. The size of the disputed territory is about 145 thousand square km of economic waters, some of which may be rich in natural gas and oil deposits. Another source of conflict between Turkey and Cyprus is the dispute over the status of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) the TRNC is not recognized by most countries in the world, while Turkey does not recognize Cyprus nor its EEZ. From the viewpoint of Erdoğan, he tried to the best of his ability to promote the plan of UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan to establish peace and mutual recognition between Cyprus and Turkish Northern Cyprus, while the Greek Cypriots decided against the move in a 2004 plebiscite (65% of the Turkish Cypriots voted for while 76% of Greek Cypriots voted against). From Turkey's point of view, the worst of all was the acceptance of Cyprus to the EU, while Turkey was forced to hold long and exhausting negotiations, which finally reached an impasse after a few years. Therefore, the emergence of the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine was preceded by Turkish frustration in the Mediterranean Basin against the background of relations with Europe that were unconnected to the Turkish expansionist policy.

Added to these ambitions to achieve justice in the distribution of resources in the international domain are Turkey's expansionist aspirations, which have become increasingly aggressive. The 'Blue Homeland' doctrine is one more link in the chain of attempts by the Erdoğan regime over the years to position Turkey as the hegemon in the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean and in the Persian Gulf. Turkey under Erdoğan's leadership is anxiously waiting for two approaching events: the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Republic in 2023 and the "Day After Erdoğan", given the advanced age and poor health of Turkey's politically strongest leader since the death of the father of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Therefore, Erdoğan, who views himself in an Epic-historical prism, feels the need for a foreign policy achievement that will glorify his heritage.

During the period 2016–19, the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine began to gain popularity in the upper echelons of the Turkish regime. This change was due to a number of factors: from an external perspective, the Erdoğan regime felt that the foreign policy it had adopted in the past, namely of regional cooperation and "zero problems with the neighbors" had not borne fruit. This was particularly the case following the removal of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, who represented the Moslem Brotherhood movement, which is closely connected to the vision of religion-state relations adopted by the Erdoğan government. As a result, the Erdoğan regime has gradually shifted to a more aggressive foreign policy that is based on self-reliance and rules out cooperation with "immoral" countries, a category that includes Egypt under el Sisi, Syria under Assad, Greece, and Israel. Domestically, Erdoğan is finding it difficult to drum up broad public support. Therefore the protection of what is perceived to be Turkey's national interests in a confrontation with the Western nations may lead to a "circling of the wagons" and increase his popularity. Also, the inclusion of the MHP, Admiral Gürdeniz's party, in Erdoğan's internal coalition, has affected the adoption of the doctrine. In August 2019, President Erdoğan made a speech to graduates of the Naval Academy. Behind him was a map showing the borders of the 'Blue Homeland,' a clear message that indicated the adoption of the doctrine by his government.



Figure 1: A map of the Blue Homeland behind President Erdoğan<sup>1</sup>

1 Ekathimerini, (2 September 2019) Erdogan takes photograph in front of 'Blue Homeland' map. <https://www.ekathimerini.com/244125/article/ekathimerini/news/erdogan-takes-photograph-in-front-of-blue-homeland-map>

At first, the attempts by Turkey under Erdoğan to become a regional hegemon were only reflected in the presumption of playing the role of an honest broker in regional conflicts, such as in the Israeli-Syrian negotiations in late 2008 and the attempts to persuade Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to use Turkey as a mediator in negotiations with the Palestinians. Israel's Operation 'Cast Lead' in the Gaza Strip in 2008 led to a blunt reaction by Erdoğan and in 2010 to an international maritime confrontation between activists from the İHH organization, a Turkish semi-governmental body, and the Israeli navy. Already then it was claimed that Israel's natural gas exploration and its agreements with Cyprus regarding their EEZs were an important factor in a policy that led to Turkey's confrontation with Israel regarding the Gaza Strip. The policy of "zero problems with the neighbors", which was introduced by Erdoğan's National Security Advisor, and later the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister - Ahmet Davutoğlu, temporarily created a diplomatic halo around Turkey, although it was already encountering problems.

The Arab Spring in 2011 led to even greater presumptuousness on the part of Turkey. Erdoğan viewed his role as one of moral leadership in the Middle East, in the hope of serving as a role model for democratization and religion-state relations in the Arab countries. The victory of Mohamed Morsi in the 2012 Egyptian elections represented significant progress for Erdoğan, whose global prestige skyrocketed when he was chosen by 'Time' magazine as the man of the year in 2011. However, these hopes were dashed when Morsi was deposed in the summer of 2013 by Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who has since then served as Egyptian President. At the same time, the riots that broke out in 'Taksim Gezi Park' led the Erdoğan regime to concentrate on political problems at home. Erdoğan's government dealt with the protests firmly openly expressing a sense of persecution on the international level. This turning point significantly reduced support for Erdoğan, both in the international community and in the Middle East specifically. The fainthearted coup against Erdoğan in 2016, the increasing confrontations with the Kurdish separatist factions in the eastern part of the country, and Turkey's severe economic crisis further complicated matters and increased Erdoğan's need to show external achievements (and enemies).

The main strategic and diplomatic layers of the tension caused by the "Blue Homeland" doctrine have deep historical roots in the history of the Republic, and this is hardly the first time in which they caused the emergence of conflict. Current tensions are inseparably connected to the civil war in Libya, which goes far beyond just short-term economic or geopolitical interests. The efforts by Erdoğan to position Turkey as a regional hegemon, in contrast to almost all of his predecessors, constitutes a major component in the revolution he has been promoting for more than two decades

in Turkey's identity. For example, a conflict arose over the territorial or economic waters between Turkey and Greece in the 1990s concerning delimitation of the maritime territory of the Cyclades, during which there were naval encounters similar to those in 2019. The conflict centered on the country's borders and was in line with the republican ethos of Atatürk, according to which, "*Turkey does not desire one inch of any other country's territory and will not give up one inch of its own.*" The Korean War, during which Turkey joined NATO, and the invasion of Cyprus in 1974, which was also meant to protect national interests, were outlying events in the Republic's history. The 'Blue Homeland' doctrine, therefore, constitutes a milestone in the shift of Turkish policy from to expansionism. However, the gap between Erdoğan's intentions and his political-strategic defense achievements is large. Turkey has not managed to achieve its maximalist aspirations in the Mediterranean, which have been met by opposition by essentially all of the major players in the Mediterranean Basin.

Turkey's attempt under the leadership of Erdoğan to become a dominant power and the aggressive methods used to realize the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine should not cloud our understanding of the legitimate basis for Turkey's demands. Moreover, since Erdoğan's actions are related to Turkey's identity, it is important to understand the role of the doctrine's geostrategic and energy components. The word "Vatan", which means homeland in Turkish, got its interpretation in Turkey simultaneously with the birth of the Republic from within the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Mustafa Kamal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic and its first president, created an pro-western, yet neutral ethos, which shunned expansionism and intentionally alienated Turkey from the Arab countries. The secondary and perhaps even negligible interest of the Turkish governments in the Arab countries has often been evident, including at the Madrid Conference in 1991, where Turkey demanded not to be identified as a Middle Eastern country. Turkey's efforts to become a full member of the EU began in 1987 and, until they came to a dead-end toward the end of the 2000s, were part of Turkey's main diplomatic efforts.

The rise of political Islam in Turkey, which was preceded by the rise of the liberal right-wing parties who had a softer approach to Atatürk's heritage, led to growing interest in Turkey's Ottoman past, which was reflected in certain sectors of society, such as the education system and the tourism industry. However, by the last decade, these were beginning to have an influence on Turkey's internal issues of identity. The desire for regional power, which has already been mentioned, and which failed in the attempt to make Turkey into a significant power that also has substantial soft power in the Middle East, has changed in the last decade. This change was reflected

in Turkey's military intervention in the civil wars in Syria and Libya, by means of which Turkey has aligned itself with radical Islamic forces. Turkey has also tightened its relations with Qatar, which has adopted the most subversive diplomatic line against the legitimacy of regimes in the Sunni nations. Turkey's attempt to reposition itself in the region is accomplished by means of consistent support for Hamas in Gaza, Islamic organizations on the Temple Mount, and finally in the adoption of the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine as a plan of action for the Erdoğan regime.

Energy also plays a role in the struggle for maritime control of the Mediterranean and it involves interests that are deeply rooted in Turkey's political culture. The loss of the Mosul (currently part of Iraq) district to the British Empire after the World War I and Turkey's War of Independence represent a loss of parts of the homeland in Turkey's collective memory, due to the loss of oil fields and royalties and the loss of control over a Turkmenian and Kurdish population. Another prime example is the oil crisis of 1973–83, which led to a severe economic crisis in Turkey that ended with a military coup and a military government from 1980–83. It is not coincidental that all of Turkey's governments have invested efforts in creating an infrastructure that will transform the country into an energy corridor to Europe and the Port of Ceyhan into a "Rotterdam of the Mediterranean". These efforts were from the beginning of a geopolitical rather than economic nature, due to Turkey's urge to redefine its role in the post-Cold War world.

The combination of the aforementioned processes produced a strategy that includes protectionist-activist principles. On the one hand, Turkey rightly claims that it was not treated fairly in the division of the EEZs in the Mediterranean. On the other hand, it has adopted measures that serve the interests of expansion far beyond its legitimate claims.

Turkey views the current division of EEZs as unfair and discriminatory. It has a much longer coastline than neighboring Greece (in the calculation of the coastline of the mainland without the cumulative coastline of the islands), and its energy needs are also several-fold more extensive (Turkey has a population of 82 million that consumes ten times more natural gas than Greece, which has a population of only 10.7 million, and five times more than Israel which has a population of 9.2 million). Turkey's energy sector is based primarily on natural gas imported from Russia, but it is interested in diversifying its energy sources. From a strategic viewpoint, Turkey is a prime route for conveying natural gas and oil from Caucasus, Russia, and Central Asia to Europe, but for it to exploit this situation for strategic purposes it needs a reliable alternative to Russian natural gas. The production of large amounts of offshore natural gas would be particularly beneficial to Turkey. The fact that the

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EU countries have sided with Greece and Cyprus in the conflict strengthens Turkish sense of alienation. Moreover, Turkey claims that in agreements signed by Greece with Italy and Egypt for the delimitation of EEZs, the borders that were arrived at were based on a calculation that was quite similar to the Turkish position.

Even if the early justification given to the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine was energy, the current situation shows that it is actually pure geostrategic interests that are involved. The price of natural gas is at rock bottom due to the Covid-19 crisis, but there are also longer-term factors, such as the growing use of oil shale, which make the development of natural gas projects unprofitable. The multinationals are abandoning existing exploration projects and are not initiating new ones. Therefore, it does not seem likely that the current tension can be resolved by way of a reallocation of natural gas only. From Turkey's perspective, this conflict is first and foremost about sovereignty. According to public opinion polls, about 58 percent of Turkey's citizens view the EEZs as an issue of importance for national security, as opposed to only 3.8 percent that held this position at the beginning of 2020. The high level of support among the Turkish public on this issue provides the Erdoğan regime with greater room for maneuver, and it may be that an escalation of the conflict will even serve domestic goals of generating support and public legitimacy.

The final removal from consideration of Turkey joining the EU provides it with new room for maneuver in unrecognized Turkish Northern Cyprus since it now feels far less need to commit to the international consensus. The decline in American involvement in the Mediterranean Basin only reinforces this trend. In terms of its maritime activities, Turkey is seeking to build a new maritime base to the east of Northern Cyprus, which will provide it with a more rapid response capability with respect to other forces in the area. However, the most blatant manifestation so far of the "Blue Homeland" doctrine was the signing in November 2019 of a memorandum of understanding between Turkey and the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya. Libya is currently undergoing a civil war between the GNA, which controls the western part of the country, and the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Marshal Khalifa Haftar, which controls the central and eastern parts. Turkey and Qatar, with some backing from the EU, support the GNA, which has Islamist tendencies and is backed by Islamic militias, including members of Jabhat al-Nusra, as opposed to Egypt, the UAE, and Russia, which support the forces of Haftar.

The agreement between Turkey and the GNA defines the delimitation of EEZs between Turkey and Libya, among other things, in a way that significantly enlarges Turkey's EEZ and interrupts the territorial continuity between Cyprus and Crete. Furthermore, the EEZ blocks the planned construction of the gas pipeline from Israel

by way of Cyprus and Greece, which will enable the export of Israeli and Cypriot gas to Europe.

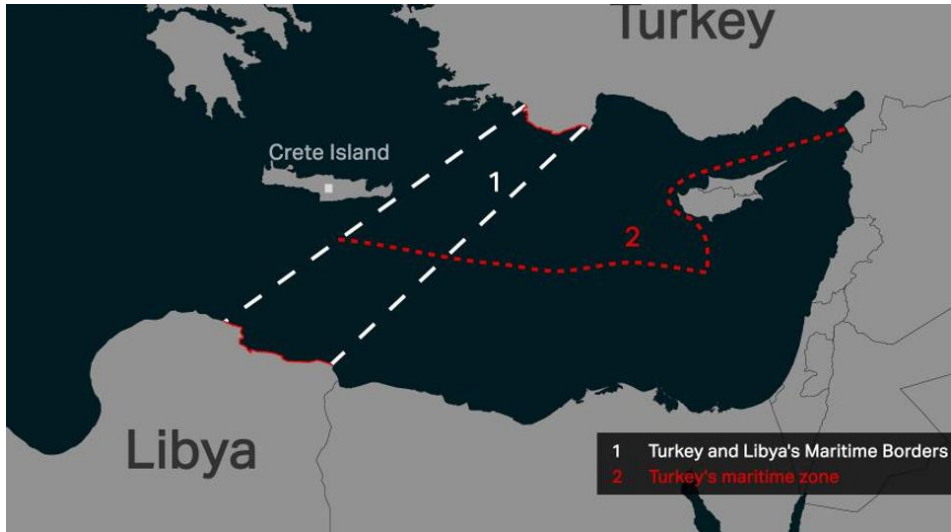


Figure 2: Delimitation of the maritime territories according to the Libyan-Turkish memorandum of understanding of November 2019

In response to the memorandum of understanding, Greece has, since June 2020, maintained contact with the LNA under the leadership of Haftar, with the goal of creating its own delimitation of the EEZ between the two countries. Moreover, there has recently been a tightening of relations between Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt, which have a shared interest in halting the Turkish expansion in the maritime domain. For Egypt, this interest is accompanied by the need to protect its western boundary against the GNA, which is supported by Turkey and Islamic militias.

It should be emphasized that for the good of the parties involved and in view of Turkey's energy needs, a solution of the dispute over Turkey's EEZ should be reached by negotiations possibly with the mediation of other countries (such as Germany) or additional organizations. Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary-General of NATO, also expressed this idea on his visit to Ankara in October 2020.<sup>2</sup>

2 "...The de-confliction mechanism can help to create the space for diplomatic efforts. It is my firm hope that the underlying disputes can now be addressed purely through negotiations, in the spirit of Allied solidarity and international law." NATO (5 October 2020), "Secretary General in Ankara: Turkey is a valued NATO Ally". [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_178545.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_178545.htm)



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Although the Convention for the Law of the Sea determines the areas of the EEZs, it of course, allows for negotiations between the parties, international arbitration, and other mechanisms for conflict resolution. The EEZ around an islands is a common issue in such conflicts, such as the Philippines vs. China; Romania vs. Ukraine; and Bangladesh vs. Myanmar, all of which involve islands and the maritime territories they provide at the expense of the mainland country. Turkey mentions in particular the conflict over EEZs between Nicaragua and Colombia, which has similar characteristics (control over islands that provide a large EEZ at the expense of the mainland country) and which was resolved by a ruling that divided the maritime territory between Nicaragua and Colombia not according to the Convention for the Law of the Sea.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, other countries of the region, as well as global players, are reacting negatively to the Turkish moves. Apart from Greece and Cyprus, whose sovereignty is being threatened by Turkey, Egypt has viewed Turkey as a rival at least since the end of Mohamed Morsi's rule, if not before. EU states, led by France as a Mediterranean nation, are opposed to the Turkish position, as is the US. Nonetheless, so far, the US and the EU have not assertively opposed the Turkish moves or actively supported Greece and Cyprus, and it remains to be seen if they will do so in the future. Without their intervention, the countries of the region will have to rely on themselves and on cooperation between them in order to deal with the threat from Turkey. Furthermore, Erdoğan's lack of success in resolving the current round of confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh region reduces the chances that Turkey will adopt a more conciliatory position in the Mediterranean anytime soon.

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3 It is beyond the scope of this article to describe the legal complexity of delimitation of maritime boundaries in international law; however, it can be stated in this context that the precedent of the conflict between Nicaragua and Columbia is not completely analogous to that between Turkey and Greece, since in the former case there were previous agreements on the matter between the countries.

## Turkey-Russia Maritime Relations

*Ido Gilad and Tim Jenkins*

### Introduction

In recent years, Turkey has engaged in a range of ambitious programs in the military, energy and economic fields with the aim of reviving its historical power and expanding its geo-strategic position in the MENA region and beyond. In support of this "*Neo-Ottoman*" agenda, Turkey is acting at times aggressively in the maritime arena, through the "*Mavi Vatan*" or "*Blue Homeland*" doctrine; increasing its Naval assets and power projection capabilities in the near seas, as well as laying claim to energy resources in conflicted areas of the Mediterranean.

This activity has increasingly brought Turkey into contact with Russia, a traditional rival, who have competed in the maritime realm since the time of Tsar Peter the Great. The relationship between the two states have historically oscillated between one of cooperation and competition. Not including prior or subsequent skirmishes, 14 major wars have taken place between 1568 and 1918; beginning with the Russo-Turkish Wars which predominantly related to control of the Black Sea, and ending with World War I. In the current era the Russo-Turkish dynamic is complex, with overlapping areas of interest and conflict. Both Russia and Turkey can be observed enacting multifaceted strategies. The two have substantial and lasting areas of cooperation in energy, as well as in the maritime arena.

### Background

Throughout history, competition between Turkey and Russia has taken place in the maritime arena. This rivalry stretches back 325 years to creation of the Russian Navy by Peter the Great who stated "*Any ruler that has but ground troops has one hand, but one that has a Navy has both hands*".<sup>1</sup> The primary role of the Navy was securing access to the open seas.

The Ottoman Navy dates back further, with its first shipbuilding facilities beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century under Bayezid the First, with the aim of controlling the straits, and grew into a significant naval power in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries with their extension into the Mediterranean Sea.

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1 ONI, (2015). *The Russian Navy A Historic Trastion*. Washington: The Office Of Naval Intelligence.

Peter the Great recognized the decline of the Ottoman Empire and its defeat by Vienna in 1683 as an opportunity for Russia to expand its power and gain access to the warm water ports of the Black Sea. He personally headed the construction of naval vessels, known as the Azov Fleet, and directed their use for a combined land and sea Russian attack on the Ottoman Azov fortress on the Don river estuary. Finding the surrounding waters too shallow for their needs, in 1696 first port for the Russian fleet in the Black Sea was established in the deeper waters of the Azov Sea at Taganrog, some 25 nautical miles west. Russian naval influence was expanded in 1774 to include the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, with the signing of the Küçük Kaynara agreement with the defeated Ottomans. Russian naval dominance over the straits was completed when the two nations cooperated to defeat the insurrection of Muhammad Ali whose armies extended from Egypt as far North as Syria. The Russian provision of Naval assistance to the Ottomans led to the signing of the Hünkâr İskelesi agreement in 1831, which lasted until the intervention of the West in 1841.

As demonstrated, the hegemonic aspirations over the maritime routes have long been a fundamental contact point between Russia and Turkey. During the creation of the modern Turkish Navy by Atatürk in the early 1920s, the Turkish Directorate of Naval Affairs purchased ships from the Soviet Union, in an early show of cooperation between the USSR and the New Turkish Republic.

The 1936 drafting of the "*Montreux Convention*", returned to Turkey control over the maritime transit routes from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits. The convention relates to all shipping, though is perhaps most strategically significant to the transit of military vessels, as well as dangerous goods shipments, both in peace time and certainly in times of tension. Importantly however, this control does not extend to the levy of fees or taxes for use of the narrow straits, which are subject to regular norms of freedom of navigation.

In recent years the Eastern Mediterranean nations have focused on the potential for exploration and production of subsea fossil fuels and its transportation, by vessels as well as through pipelines. The strategic competition for energy resources among the regional actors raises the economic and geo-political significance of the zone, also known by the term of "*Energy Diplomacy*".

This geographical area of importance is significant for Turkey, positioned in a geo-strategic junction in the heart of the Eurasian continent, between the Caucasus, the Balkans and the Middle East. From a historical perspective, Turkey's influence over the region stems from the time of the Ottoman Empire with its geographical

conquests, as well as its role as leader of the Sunni Muslim World which ended with the declaration of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923.<sup>2</sup>

For the Russian Federation (RF), as the successor of the Soviet Union, much importance is given to its peripheral territories, which act as a buffer zone against foreign aggression. This is especially relevant in its South West which provides strategic access to the Black Sea, and from there and exit through the Bosphorus and Dardanelle Straits to the Mediterranean and beyond. This importance can be seen in various Russian activities in the area, of note Russia is planning to hold its annual command and control (C2) exercise in the Black Sea, this year named "*Caucus 2020*" in September.

Nonetheless, in recent years Turkey has reminded the Russians of its own regional aspirations through control on this significant maritime junction, which is perceived as Turkish inland waters. A reminder of its maritime dominance over the straits was observed in Turkey's posturing towards Russia immediately after the downing of a Russian Sukhoi-24 fighter plane over the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015. In the subsequent diplomatic exchanges, Turkey was quick to signal to Russia their ability to close, or deny access to the strategic choke point in the event of further escalations. Surprisingly, the mutual connection between the two leaders were tightened after the crisis, with Erdogan and Putin renewing the spirit of coordination which prevailed between them throughout Putin's first decade of rule, prior to the outbreak of the "*Arab Spring*".

Some of the expressions for mutual partnership is also evidenced by the Turkish procurement of Russian weapons, such as the advanced S-400 air defense systems, which were declared operational by Turkish Army forces in 2019.<sup>3</sup> An offer for additional units was raised by Russia as late as June 2020. The Turkish acquisition has severely strained the US-Turkish relationship with the US withholding the delivery of F-35 aircraft to Turkey. This rift further strengthens the Russian position who have offered Turkey the possibility of acquiring Russian-made Sukhoi-35s in replacement of the F-35s.

Another initiative by President Erdogan which emphasizes the importance placed on maritime issues by Turkey, can be found in an enormous transport and infrastructure project, aiming to duplicate the strait's current passage by a parallel artificial canal. The project, known as the "*Istanbul Canal*", is still in the planning stages, though

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2 Dewdney, J. (2020). *Turkey*. Retrieved 2020, from ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA.

3 Kasapoglu, C. (2020). Turkey's Critical "S-400 Moment" Has Arrived. *Eurasia Daily Monitor: The Jamestown Foundation*, 17(61).

is slated for completion in 2023 in order to symbolically honor the centenary celebrations of the foundation of modern Turkey by Atatürk. The centenary also coincides with the completion of two decades of Erdoğan's own rule. The artificial sea water canal is proposed to be cut west of the city of Istanbul and is planned to be approximately 40 kilometers in length, with a width of some 150 meters. This project is expected to reduce the current volume of vessels transiting the straits (about 40,000 a year). In addition, it would establish mooring areas, infrastructure projects including warehouses and storage facilities, also residential complexes on canal banks. The project is expected to contribute to the Turkish treasury through its maritime revenue, by fees and taxes to be collected upon vessel's passage, as being done in the existing Suez and Panama Canals, and projected in the future Russian "Arctic Suez Canal" project. Such fees currently cannot be collected from the transit of the Bosphorus straits. This futuristic flagship project of Erdoğan is expected to demonstrate Turkey's national maritime power, its status as a modern state, though perhaps most importantly, it places the Blue Homeland Doctrine (*Mavi Vatan*), at its top priority.<sup>4</sup>

Turkey's maritime orientation has therefore evolved fundamentally in view of the uniqueness of the country's geography. Most of its territory, the Anatolian Peninsula is bounded by the Azov and Black Seas to the north, the Sea of Marmara, the Aegean Seas to the west, and the Mediterranean Sea to the south. The length of the country's coasts (7,200 km) is 2.5 times greater than its land borders (2,816 km). About eighty percent of Turkey's population is concentrated along its coasts, while the city of Istanbul itself contains around twenty percent of the country's total population, and has held the status of Europe's biggest city since 2005.

Another indicator of Turkey's naval orientation in recent years is the development of and retaining bases and ports in distant territories, far from its own borders. Among them are the Island of Sawakin near the port of Sudan, Qatar and Somalia. This course expanded the naval influence of the Blue Homeland doctrine - as previously focused on the maritime space in its littoral waters (*Mavi Vatan*) towards the open seas (*Açık Denizlere*).<sup>5</sup>

Initially, the seizure of Northern Cyprus in 1974, led to the Turkish claim that the northern part of the island was in fact an independent Turkish territory. This argument

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4 Kasapoglu, C. (2020). Turkey's Growing Military Expeditionary Posture. *Terrorism Monitor: The Jamestown Foundation*, 18(10).

5 Kasapoglu, C. (2020). Turkey's Growing Military Expeditionary Posture. *Terrorism Monitor: The Jamestown Foundation*, 18(10).

was followed by Turkey's claim to vast economic waters in the Mediterranean, mainly to the West and South of the island of Cyprus. Turkey's latest plans for new energy exploration off Cyprus' shores,<sup>6</sup> could fuel Mediterranean tensions, as Cyprus together with Greece reject what they consider as illegal Turkish incursions into the Cypriot exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Since the creation of the 200nm EEZ with the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS), competition has arisen among states across the world, and in the Eastern Mediterranean in particular due to interests in the rights, production and exploitation of natural resources as were found in the region's deep sea. Sovereign entities, or non-state actors such as multinational corporations acting on their behalf, compete for rights and royalties for the exploitation of fossil fuel resources, most notably natural gas. In addition to resources, a number of other key maritime industries play an important role; seaborne trade, maritime transport, commercial fishing, sporting, tourism and other matters likewise are subjected to competition among the regional players.

The majority of Turkey's energy requirements are currently centered on fossil fuel energy sources. Historically, the majority of this energy was delivered in the form of natural gas, over 70% of which was provided by the Russian energy giant Gazprom. The gas is delivered through the "Turkstream" subsurface pipelines crossing the Black Sea from Russia before reaching Turkish shores. It not only served Turkey's own needs, but also provided revenue through taxation on the transit of energy exported to other consumers, mostly in Western Europe, with some in Eastern states, such as Bulgaria.

Turkey actively attempts to diversify its energy suppliers, with Azerbaijan overtaking Russia in natural gas supply in 2020. Figures show a decrease of up to 72% from Russia,<sup>7</sup> placing them close to US LNG in terms of gas supply<sup>8</sup> (see Figure 1). However, due to a "take or pay" clause in the Gazprom contract, Turkish companies are thought to be in significant debt to the company,<sup>9</sup> which constitutes a point of leverage for Russia moving forward.

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6 Kokkinidis, T. (2020). *Turkey Plans New Drilling Off Cyprus, Fueling Mediterranean Tensions*. Retrieved 2020, from Greek Reporter.

7 Mammadov, R. (2020). Turkey Makes Strides in Diversifying its Natural Gas Imports. *The Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 17(97).

8 Daily Sabah. (2020). *Turkey's Purchase of Russian Gas Drops by 62% Year-on-Year*. Retrieved 2020, from Daily Sabah.

9 Mammadov, R. (2020). Turkey Makes Strides in Diversifying its Natural Gas Imports. *The Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 17(97).

A further example for a departure from the fossil fuel dependency can be observed within the construction since 2018 of Turkey's first civilian nuclear reactor in Akkuyu, located in Mersin Bay on the Mediterranean Sea, by the Russian state-owned company Rosatom. According to plan, the project should be completed in the centennial year 2023. In addition, Turkey plans a string of other new reactors to be implemented across the country.<sup>10</sup>

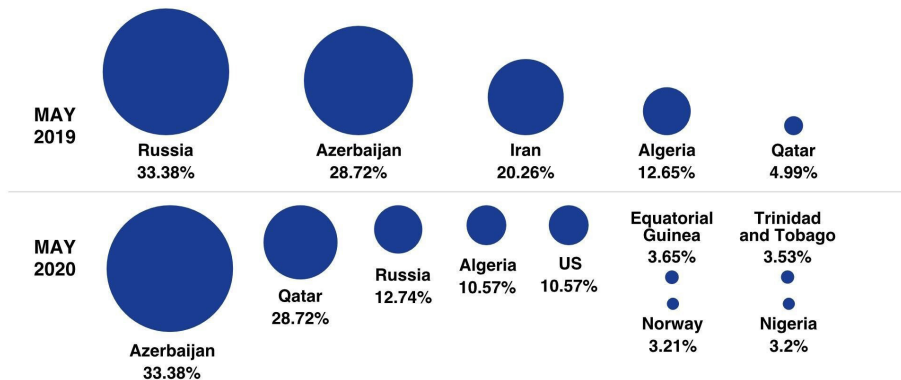


Figure 1: Turkey diversifies gas imports (Daily Sabah, 2020)

A number of potential alternative avenues of supply have been considered, the most prestigious of which for Turkey is based on its own independent maritime resource exploration for energy sources in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. From Ankara's point of view, such actions are within its rights, however such aggressive moves are viewed as illegal by neighboring states. Turkey has deepened its relations with Qatar, Somalia and Sudan to strengthen its energy supply routes, as well as for political and military considerations. Turkey seeks to secure alternative sources of energy from Libya too. The Turkish involvement there was encouraged by its successes and experience in the Syrian arena, partly in coordination with Russia.

Turkey's demonstration of its regional power projection capabilities has a number of key factors. First, Erdogan's evident Neo-Ottoman agenda, with his ideological view of Turkey as the leader of the Muslim world. Secondly, Ankara recognizes its aspirations towards membership in the EU are unlikely to come to fruition and recognizes a weakening in the traditional NATO alliance. Third, Turkey's view of the US and Western withdrawal from the Syrian arena and the Middle East more broadly, which has resulted in higher tolerance for Turkish military actions and has further motivated Ankara's adventurism and expansionism. Finally, all of the above factors

10 WNA, (2020). Nuclear Power in Turkey. Retrieved 2020, from World Nuclear Association.



aid in Turkey's quest for energy diversification through securing transit routes both to and through Turkey.

The use of such techniques, especially the use of Islamist proxies, has affected Turkey's fragile position on the continuum between Russia on the one hand, and the West on the other, specifically considering Turkey's status as a full member of the NATO alliance. Further inflaming tensions are Ankara's threats to allow large streams of refugees to cross over from Turkey to European countries, as well as tacitly allowing the transit of many through the Aegean Sea to Greece, negatively affecting relations with its Western allies. Russia benefits from this tension within NATO as will be further demonstrated below.

### Competition in the Russo-Turkish Relationship

The multi-faceted relationship between Russia and Turkey has been the cause of competition, punctuated by periods of cooperation. This dynamic has continued bilaterally since Tsarist époque, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, until the present time following the foundation of the RF.

In the Black Sea, Turkey retains a comparative advantage in overall naval platforms with 69 surface vessels and 14 submarines,<sup>11</sup> and seeks to strengthen their anti-ship missile arsenal through production of its own advanced surface to surface missile "Atmaca". Erdogan is also acting to further build Turkey's naval capabilities, in line with the Mavi Vatan, Blue Homeland doctrine and beyond. In addition to the Atmaca missile program, Turkey is reinforcing its naval power projection capabilities with new systems designed to carry a range of weapons, including both manned and unmanned platforms.

By comparison in the Black Sea, Russia currently retains the comparative advantage in aerial assets. In addition, in terms of coastal based systems, Russia has greater strike capacity through its missile systems, such as the Kaliber series. Russia's excellent non-kinetic sharp power capabilities, including information operations, act as a force multiplier to the aforementioned systems. These combine to form a formidable exclusion doctrine, known "anti-access area denial" (A2/AD). Like the Turks, Russia is also expanding its naval force structure in the Black Sea including 20 new combat vessels, including 6 Frigates, 3 submarines as well as new missile

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11 Gogwadze, G., Tskhakaia, G. (2019). Black Sea Security: Vision and Ideas. *Black Sea Security*, 4(36).

boats.<sup>12</sup> Putin himself attended a ceremony in Crimea for the building of two new amphibious landing ships,<sup>13</sup> demonstrating the importance Russia places on this force expansion. This general trend is reflected also in the Mediterranean arena, through its bases in Tartus and Latakia.

Russia's expansionist tendencies became apparent in the period beginning with the 2007 Estonian "*First Cyber War*", followed by the 2008 invasion of Georgia, which supplied Russia with additional seaport in Abkhazia on the Black Sea. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 increased and strengthened Russia's position and control over the Black Sea region. Demonstrating its power, Russia conducted in this maritime arena a large-scale maneuver in early 2020, which included missile launches, and was notably attended by President Putin and high-ranking Russian officials. Russia is strengthening its global maritime position, and developing its fleet as a top priority. This trend can also be observed in the Mediterranean arena. Russia's participation in the fighting in Syria since 2015 supporting the Assad regime has rewarded it with further forward operating bases for its land, sea and air forces, specifically in the ports Tartus and Latakia, as well as air power based at the airport of Khmeimim in Latakia province. This strategy in Syria has successfully facilitated an expanded Russian footprint in the region, with a 49 year lease granted to Russia over the strategic port of Tartus, doing much to consolidate its aspirations for power projection capabilities into the future over the entire Eastern Mediterranean, beyond their Black and Caspian Seas bases.

These various outposts could serve Russia as a potential multi-directional maritime deterrent over Turkey in the vectors; of the Black, Caspian, North and Eastern Mediterranean Seas. The consolidated forward operating bases and asset concentration on the eastern Mediterranean allows Russia to advance its A2/AD Doctrine over not only the Syrian coast and Eastern Mediterranean, but also significantly expands Russian influence in the Central Mediterranean, specifically the North African Coast, Algeria, Egypt and perhaps most importantly Libya.

In the Chaos of the Libyan Civil War following the UN mission which led to the overthrow of Qadhafi, multiple actors have vied for dominance in the war-torn country. Turkey chose in 2019 to support the UN recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), based in the capital of Tripoli, also supported by Qatar and Italy. The move gave the Turks access to Libyan energy sources, both on land and sea

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12 CGS. (2020). *Policy Paper: Trends of the Security Situation in the Black Sea Region*. Kyiv: Center for Global Studies. p. 2.

13 Ibid. p. 4.

facilitated in part through the creation of a new EEZ, demarcating the Libyan and Turkish maritime borders.

The parties who support the opposing Libyan Eastern National Army (LNA) include Russia, Egypt, France, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the UAE. This has led to tensions recently between France and Turkey, both NATO members, who allegedly support opposite sides in the conflict. Most recently, in a significant escalation in the maritime domain, a French Naval Frigate tried to board a Tanzanian flagged vessel suspected of carrying weapons to Libya, banned under the UN embargo. The French complained that, in contravention of NATO rules and international norms, they were prevented from boarding the suspect vessel when three Turkish warships targeted the French frigate with weapons system radars, forcing the abortion of the mission, as well as French Naval participation in a NATO drill in the Aegean Sea,<sup>14</sup> and culminating in the French suspending their related NATO activities.

Trilateral relations between Turkey, Russia and third parties are also worthy of examination; an important example can be found in the current dynamics between Russia, Turkey and Egypt. Russia is cultivating deep ties with both regional powers in regards to energy and infrastructure, including civilian nuclear reactors, as well as the supply of military equipment. At the same time, there is considerable tension between Turkey and Egypt. While the Egyptian-Turkish rivalry is but one of many in which Russia plays a role on both sides, it is a particularly poignant example as it takes into consideration many of the core values of Turkey as outlined above. This can be observed most recently as the two have taken opposite sides in the Libyan conflict, with Egyptian troops formally entering into Libya in 2020. In addition, Egypt fundamentally rejects Turkey's association with the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and Qatar, as well as Erdogan's desire for leadership of the Sunni Muslim world. Furthermore, the signing of the Turkish-Libyan EEZ deal had caused considerable concern over fossil resources, most notably gas field exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. These tensions, as well as others, have led to a regional treaty called the EastMed Gas Forum (EMGF), settled in Cairo, between Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Jordan, Italy, Israel and the Palestinian Authority. What is clear is that the Russians seek to expand their interests with all parties, in the furtherance of its own pragmatic interests.

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14 Corbet, S., Cook, L. (2020). *France Freezes Role in NATO Naval Force Amid Turkey Tensions*. "The suspension is from NATO operation "Sea Guardian" (held since 2016), with the purpose to prevent terrorism, weapons proliferation, and other maritime threats in the Mediterranean arena".

Turkey is well aware of the Russian relative advantage in the military fields, as well as in the energy market. However, Turkey does not ignore some possible scenarios in relation to the future of the Russian Federation which may increase its own strategic position. Factors such as the declining Russian population over the next decade and its anticipated effects on the Russian economy and national resilience. The population decrease has not yet taken into account recent potential effects caused by the Covid-19 crisis. In contrast, the Turkish population shows no sign of decrease. In addition, there is a relevant question about "*the day after*" President Putin. Even though formal legislation was introduced in June 2020 extending Putin's presidential term until 2036, Putin is currently 67 years old, thus a sudden change in leadership could be expected to have negative effects on the Russian economy and cause uncertainty in their strategic direction.

### **Cooperation in the Russo-Turkish Relationship**

Russia seeks to retain its position in energy supply, as well as expanding its political influence in the region, strengthening its role as "mediator" among the players various conflicts. This status could for example increase dialogue with Turkey as well as the GNA in Libya which Turkey, still mindful of Russian energy cooperation, may support.

The Russian company Novatek, with its probable affiliation with Putin administration, is linked to some of the regional exploration initiatives for fossil energy, together with other foreign companies such as the French TOTAL and Italian ENI. Their activity commenced in March 2020, West of the Lebanese coast. Turkey also put efforts into conducting research in this maritime space, as it does in other locations in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. To this end, Turkey currently owns and operates three research vessels. As demonstrated, Turkey shares with Russia various areas of mutual interest and activity, both in the military and energy realms. This could potentially lead to a deepening of cooperation between the two in related areas, from maritime assets to intelligence sharing and military procurement. Both states share the mutual interest of reducing the impact of the emerging EMGF. Turkey is the forum's key opponent and Russia's relative power in the energy field is expected to be weakened by the EMGF, which as a consequence could possibly bring both into closer cooperation as noted above. A recent "*Tweet*" in June 2020, obeisantly on behalf of the Turkish Foreign Minister may represent a probing of Israeli interest to a return to bilateral negotiations

on maritime and energy issues and coordination.<sup>15</sup> Strengthening this assumption, in July 2020, Turkish Admiral (Ret.) Yayci presented a map on national television, outlining the potential borders of a new EEZ with Israel (see figure 2). It could also be assumed that a condition of such talks would be the withdrawal from the EMGF by the Israeli side. Russia, due to its ties with Turkey, may tacitly support these initiatives even if it does not openly acknowledge Ankara's approach.

Erdogan has not forgotten Putin's support during and in the wake of the failed coup attempt of 2016 while other Western nations protested Erdogan's trampling of human rights in response to the coup. The Russian Deputy foreign minister has recently pointed out that the relations between the two countries reflect the strategic partnership between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 2: Admiral Chiat Yayci, 25 July 2020<sup>17</sup>

- 15 Mehmet kara@emehmetkara twitter from 18<sup>th</sup> June 23:03: "Turkey foreign minister Cavosuglu says: Turkey can work with Israel in East Mediterranean if Israel cancels the agreement they made with Greek administrated Cyprus. earlier we said we can work with everyone except Greek administration Cyprus". ehmet kara@emehmetkara twitter from 18<sup>th</sup> June 23:17 in addition Israel earlier had some attempts to bring their natural sources to world market via Turkey because they know very well that Turkey is the most feasible way
- 16 MEMO. (2020). *Official: Russia-Turkey Relations Based on Solid Foundations*. Retrieved 2020, from Middle East Monitor
- 17 Twitter@Haberturk tv / @ersoyakif1.

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## Conclusion

As demonstrated above, the oscillating nature between numerous wars and confrontations, with periods of cooperation in Russo-Turkish relations are an historical and lasting feature between the two states, comprising multiple factors, central among them geography and the strategic maritime access routes from the Black Sea. Nonetheless, the current dynamic can be viewed through a prism of strategic pragmatism, with both sides acting to capitalize on regional instabilities and uncertainty while remaining cognizant of the factors which are likely to unite or divide the nations, in order to keep the balance while managing domestic expectations.

An example of this can be seen in the recent and controversial decision by Erdogan to reverse the decision of Ataturk regarding the status of the UNESCO listed Hagia Sophia Museum, by converting it into a mosque, in line with the Islamic and Neo-Ottoman tendencies of his domestic base. The building dates to the 6<sup>th</sup> century and was built as the central Cathedral of Byzantium until its conquest in 1453 by the Ottomans, and has traditionally been the source of tensions with the Eastern Orthodox Church. Hence, the relatively subdued response to this affront by President Putin, who uses the Russian Orthodox Church as a tool of state, can arguably be viewed in light of this strategic pragmatism. Russian energy projects such as the new nuclear power plants, as well as gas, could be assumed to figure prominently in the Russian cost benefit analysis. In addition, Turkey's consistent drift away from its EU aspirations and the West, highlighted in the current tensions with its NATO partners, is a boon for Russia in fragmenting the alliance, and causes Turkey to seek alliances elsewhere, with Russia acting to encourage Turkey into expanding their strategic partnership.

Turkey under Erdogan is viewed by many observers as a Neo-Ottoman revisionist power. As with numerous countries, Turkey sees a trend towards a multi-polar world in which control of, or at least a strong presence in the world's sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and strategic choke points are imperative. In the perception of Ankara, the rulings of UNCLOS regarding EEZs has deprived it of the share in the natural resources the Eastern Mediterranean, which has led it to draw bilateral EEZ boundaries with Libya, much to the consternation of its neighbors. Furthermore, its lack of financial benefit from the shipping passing through the Bosphorus straits has been a prime motivator in Erdogan's Istanbul Canal initiative. These factors have driven the Blue Homeland, *Mavi Vatan* doctrine and the Turkish push to increase its naval power both in its littoral waters, as well as further afield; as evidenced by its established bases in Sudan, Somalia and Qatar, as well as the use of Misrata and Tripoli Ports in Libya, with construction of a permanent base said to be taking place in Misrata. In addition, in late July 2020 unconfirmed reports surfaced of a Turkish

port deal in Muscat Oman.<sup>18</sup> Whilst the reliability of the reports regarding Oman are in question, there is no doubt that Turkey wishes to expand its influence over the Persian Gulf, strategic straits of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman beyond its current operating base in Qatar.

The current Corona-19 pandemic and its long-term effects on demographics, energy prices and geo-politics are yet to be fully understood, though the flux created in the world order and supply chains can be expected to cause all parties to seek strategic advantage wherever possible. How this will affect the Russo-Turkish relationship remains to be seen. What can be sure, is that Erdogan will continue to use the "*Turkish Bazaar*" strategy to negotiate with regional states in the economic, military and maritime realms.

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