

Unpacking the Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean

by Nathalie Tocci

Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean is nothing new. Athens, Ankara and Nicosia know this all too well. One only needs to rewind back to the 1996 crisis over the islets of Imia/Kardak, the 1974 Turkish military intervention and ensuing occupation of Northern Cyprus or the 1963 constitutional breakdown of the bizonal and bicommunal Republic of Cyprus to recall the most salient milestones of a set of conflicts which have alternated between open hostility and partial reconciliation since Greek independence in 1830.

Untying the Gordian knot at the core of this triangular set of conflicts was never easy. At various points in past decades, the parties inched towards peace.

The Greek–Turkish rapprochement in 1999 that triggered a virtuous cycle in Turkey’s European journey until 2005 as well as the possibility of peace in Cyprus through the 2004 Annan Plan was the last and most

significant of such moments. Since then – notwithstanding hopes in Crans Montana in 2017 – conflict has entrenched in Cyprus, the EU has turned its back on Turkey, while Ankara began inexorably sliding towards authoritarianism.

There are dissonant views as to how these developments are connected. Should we be finger-pointing Turkey, and in particular President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s deepening authoritarian bent over the last decade or more? Does the original sin lie instead in the EU’s betrayed promises to Turkey and Northern Cyprus, when the EU backtracked on its promise of direct trade with Northern Cyprus after 2004 and began getting cold feet over Turkey’s EU membership when the ink on the opening of accession talks was not yet dry?

Differences and disagreements aside, what is clear is that all these dots are

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connected. The vicious cycle in the region is part of the same sad story.

However, what makes matters infinitely worse today is that conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean is no longer confined to a triangle in which parties stand at loggerheads around core questions of sovereignty, identity and security. It is no longer only about power-sharing in Cyprus, and the delimitation of territorial waters, national airspaces, exclusive economic zones and the status of a few uninhabited islets in the Aegean Sea.

The Eastern Mediterranean conflict has become an intractable polyhedron, in which sovereignty and identity disputes have morphed into and have been muddied by migration, energy and regional rivalries. On top of this, the conflict's geography now engulfs Europe, North Africa and the Middle East too.

It began when a divided Cyprus entered the EU in 2004, making the latter a party to the conflict. It expanded to North Africa and the Middle East, when gas discoveries drove Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Italy together into the East Med Energy Forum, cornering Turkey. As Libya and the intertwined question of political Islam were thrown into the mix, the conflict deformed into a regional conflagration, adding France, Russia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) to the cohort of Turkish adversaries.

Khalifa Haftar's April 2019 military offensive, backed by Egypt, the UAE, France and Russia, while not opposed, other than through words, by the

international community, galvanised Ankara into military action in support of Tripoli's UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). Any observer of the region knew that Turkey could have never afforded to see an openly hostile government in Tripoli. Given the international community's passivity on Libya, Ankara's military move was a matter of when, not if.

Through Libya, Turkey has re-entered the game, which has now circled back to where it began: sovereignty, security and identity in Cyprus and the Aegean.

This game, however, has become infinitely more dangerous. Not only does it now involve many more players, but energy discoveries, far from catalysing reconciliation, have crystallised long-standing sovereignty disputes in the region. Nowhere is this clearer than in the twin and mutually incompatible exclusive economic zone accords between Turkey and Tripoli's GNA on the one hand and Greece and Egypt on the other.

Playing hardball in the Eastern Mediterranean won't work. The balance of forces is such that neither side will prevail. The United States, regardless of the administration in office, is unlikely to invest significant political (let alone military) capital. Russia is all too happy to see a simmering conflict that concomitantly stems the energy potential of the region while driving an even deeper wedge within NATO.

The EU continues to mull over sanctions on Turkey, but is unlikely to move forward meaningfully in practice along this path. The Foreign Affairs



Council kicked the can along the road to the European Council. But it is both preposterous to compare (let alone hold hostage) sanctions on Lukashenko's Belarus with sanctions on Turkey and, even if meaningful sanctions were to be imposed on Turkey, it is naïve to assume this will deter rather than embolden Ankara in the region.

sobering first step towards genuine de-escalation – and perhaps even reconciliation – in the region.

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In fact, as Germany pursues its careful mediation, and Greece and Turkey inch towards a resumption of exploratory talks, EU sanctions on Turkey would be outright irresponsible. At best, reciprocal chest beating can generate a mutually hurting stalemate that deters outright military confrontation. At worst, the added geographic and thematic complexity of conflict can inadvertently slip into uncontrolled violence.

The key does not lie in Brussels, Washington, Paris or Berlin. It rests with Athens and Ankara instead. The 1999 earthquake diplomacy was far from obvious at the time and happened thanks to enlightened leaderships on both sides. It is that same spirit that has to be found today.

As exploration vessels and warships pepper the seas, risking collisions and clashes at any moment, rekindling that spirit seems a pipedream today. Yet expecting a silver bullet to come from outside is even less likely. External powers can at most facilitate, encourage and support. They cannot coerce.

Feeding hopes or rather illusions of external coercion does not amount to solidarity. Arguably it is exactly the reverse. Recognising this is the

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