

# Sovereignty Disputes and Resource Discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Conflict Analysis Perspective

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**Abstract:** Recent developments in the Eastern Mediterranean have redrawn attention to possibility for conflict over sovereignty and sea borders between neighboring countries in the region, including Turkey, Greece, the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Egypt, Israel, and Libya, among others. Especially since 2016, competition over energy resources has exacerbated the existing sovereignty disputes. Competing alliances and interventions by third parties such as the EU and member states such as France and Italy have complicated the prospects for the establishment of cooperative mechanisms in the extraction and distribution of energy resources. Considering that possibility for tensions have increased considerably, this paper provides an analysis of the recent developments in the Eastern Mediterranean from a conflict analysis perspective with a focus on Greece and Turkey as main regional stakeholders. After providing a brief assessment of the current context, the article analyzes the situation with regards to three main aspects: actors (including their positions, interests, issues, means of influence, and willingness to negotiate), dividers and connectors (strategic, political, socioeconomic, cultural, psychological), and drivers of conflict and peace.

**Keywords:** Eastern Mediterranean, Greece, Turkey, Conflict Analysis, Sovereignty Disputes.

## Doğu Akdeniz’de Egemenlik Anlaşmazlıkları ve Doğal Kaynakların Keşfi: Çatışma Çözümü Perspektifinden Bir İnceleme

**Öz:** Doğu Akdeniz’de son zamanlarda yaşanan gelişmeler Türkiye, Yunanistan, Kıbrıs Rum Cumhuriyeti, Kuzey Kıbrıs Türkiye Cumhuriyeti, Mısır, İsrail ve Libya da dahil olmak üzere bölge ülkeleri arasında egemenlik ve deniz sınırları ile ilgili çatışma olasılığını gündeme getirmiştir. Özellikle 2016 yılından itibaren enerji kaynakları alanındaki yükselen rekabet bölgede var olan egemenlik anlaşmazlıklarını kızıştırmıştır. Bölgede oluşan rakip ittifaklar ve Avrupa Birliği ve Fransa ve İtalya gibi üye ülkeleri de kapsayan bölge dışı aktörlerin müdahaleleri, enerji kaynakların kullanılması ve dağıtılması ile ilgili işbirliği mekanizmaların kurulmasını güçlendirmektedir. Bölgede yükselen tansiyonu göz önünde bulundurarak, bu çalışma, Türkiye ve Yunanistan’a odaklanarak, Doğu Akdeniz’de son zamanlarda meydana gelen gelişmeleri çatışma çözümü perspektifinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bölgedeki şu anki durumun bir değerlendirmesini sunduktan sonra, çalışma bölgedeki durumu üç ana açıdan incelemektedir: aktörler (pozisyonlar, çıkarlar, konular, etki araçları ve müzakere istekliliği bakımından), ayrıştırıcı ve birleştirici unsurlar (stratejik, siyasi, sosyo-ekonomik, kültürel, psikolojik) ve çatışmaya ve barışa yol açan faktörler.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Doğu Akdeniz, Yunanistan, Türkiye, Çatışma Analizi, Egemenlik Anlaşmazlıkları.

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## **Introduction**

The Eastern Mediterranean has become a region of controversy in the last decade. Tensions related to the Cyprus issue and adjacent sovereignty claims between Greece and Turkey in the Aegean Sea constitute perennial issues that underlie the recent tensions. Since 2018, developments in the region about the delimitation of maritime zones and adjacent sovereignty issues have complicated the relations among neighboring countries in the region and especially between Greece and Turkey. Furthermore, Turkey's rivalries with its Mediterranean neighbors Israel, Egypt, and the UAE have contributed to a complex set of alliance politics between Greece and these countries, enhancing the disputes over sovereignty in the region. In tandem with the ongoing Cyprus dispute, the Eastern Mediterranean has increasingly become a region that presents risks for open confrontation. The most recent such instance took place in August 2020, when a minor collision happened between a Turkish warship escorting a survey vessel and a Greek frigate. While the collision did not escalate into open conflict, it underlined the need for assessing prospects for conflict and peace in the region from an analytical perspective and examine possible pathways for preventing and addressing future confrontational situations.

This study provides an analysis of the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean from a conflict analysis perspective by using the conflict analysis framework developed by Matthew Levinger (2013). Conflict analysis frameworks are useful analytical tools for assessing both risks for conflict and prospects for peace regarding a conflictual situation. In general terms, a conflict assessment is defined as "a systematic process to analyze and prioritize the dynamics of peace, conflict, stability, and instability" in a given conflict context (USAID, 2012). The aim of conflict analysis is to provide a diagnosis of the conflict situation and develop recommendations for an appropriate response. A variety of international policy institutions and organizations, including the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, the

United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and also governments, including the Government of the United States' Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) and the Government of the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) Conflict Assessment, have developed their own assessment tools. Conflict assessment frameworks are tools for both understanding the different aspects of a conflictual situation and also developing solutions to them through a multidimensional analysis. The assessment tool used here focuses on four main aspects: context, actors (including their positions, interests, issues, means of influence, and willingness to negotiate), dividers and connectors (strategic, political, socioeconomic, cultural, psychological), and drivers for conflict and peace.

This study offers two innovative aspects with regards to conflict analysis. First, while conflict assessment frameworks have been predominantly directed towards assessing internal conflicts, this study argues that such frameworks can be a useful tool for analyzing regional disputes involving a complex set of actors and cross-cutting issues. Accordingly, the Eastern Mediterranean offers the chance for an analysis at the regional level from a multidimensional perspective. Secondly, conflict assessment frameworks predominantly address conflict and post-conflict situations. Here, it is argued that conflict assessment tools can be useful for analyzing tensions that have the potential for escalating into conflict. While no open conflict exists in the region currently, the prospects for escalation are high; a situation that begs an analytical perspective. With this purpose, the article is organized as follows: the first part provides a brief analysis of the context in light of recent developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. The next part proceeds to conflict analysis with focus on three main aspects: actors, dividers and connectors, and drivers for conflict and peace. The final part concludes.

### **Context: Resource Discoveries and Recent Developments in the Eastern Mediterranean**

Recent tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean are centred around the discovery of sizeable energy resources and adjacent claims of maritime borders. While the tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean regarding resource discoveries surfaced in the past decade, tensions between Greece and Turkey regarding the exploitation of maritime resources date back to the 1970s. In 1973, the Turkish government announced the start of exploration activities in the Aegean Sea in areas claimed by Greece. After the start of exploration activities in 1974 and rising tensions between Greece and Turkey, the prospects for solving the Cyprus issue through negotiations evaded when the Turkish army conducted a military operation to Cyprus (Axt, 2021).

The discovery of gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean region dates back to the late 2000s. Israel's gas explorations in the Leviathan, Tamar, Dalit, Tanin, and Karish fields have been main developments since 2009. The Tamar and Leviathan fields discovered in 2009 and 2010 respectively constitute the largest Israeli discoveries. In 2011, Noble Energy's discovery of the Aphrodite offshore gas field in Cyprus constitutes another large reserve discovery. While these discoveries await development in terms of drilling activities, the Italian energy company Eni's discovery of natural gas in Egypt's Zohr field in 2015 constitutes the largest discovery in terms of reserves to date and is currently under production. Following these developments, in 2017, Turkey announced a more active engagement in offshore oil and gas exploration and outlined its seismic studies and drilling operations (Stanic & Karbuz, 2021). In 2019, the Turkish Petroleum Corporation TPAO conducted several drilling activities in block 6 which the Republic of Cyprus claims to fall within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Demiryol, 2019). Since 2019, Turkey has continued its drilling activities in parts that are contested between Turkey, the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece.

The most recent confrontation in the Eastern Mediterranean was triggered by two memoranda signed by Turkey and Libya in November 2019, the first one demarcating the exclusive economic

zones of the two countries and the second dealing with military cooperation and more specifically Turkey's provision of military support to the government of Libya. At the core of the crisis is the issue of the Greece and Turkey's Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and associated maritime arrangements. Maritime delimitation arrangements in the Eastern Mediterranean date back to the early 2000s. The Greek Republic of Cyprus (RoC) signed delimitation agreements with Egypt in 2003, Lebanon in 2007 (not ratified by the Lebanese Parliament), and Israel in 2010. These agreements prepared the ground for the subsequent isolation of Turkey in the region and its recent offensive through exploration and drilling activities. Cyprus's maritime arrangements provoked Turkey's reaction since Turkey claims that the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus also has EEZ claims. In support of this position, Turkey signed a maritime delimitation agreement with the TRNC in 2011. Turkey further sustains its claim that islands, including Cyprus, cannot have the full extent of EEZ of 200 nautical miles. As such, Turkish EEZ claims in the Eastern Mediterranean are in conflict with the Republic of Cyprus's claimed EEZ.

Since the early developments in the discovery of sizeable energy resources in early 2010s, the interlinkage with the Cyprus question, the EEZ controversy, and the deteriorating Turkish-Israeli relations have been three main topics of concern (Grigoriadis, 2014). Especially regarding the Cyprus question, energy discoveries deepened divisions over sovereignty issues and complicated peace talks for solving the Cyprus conflict (Gürel & Le Cornu, 2014). Indeed, the 'hydrocarbonization' of the Cyprus problem has its roots in the early 2000s and the early discoveries regarding energy resources in the region (Kahveci Özgür, 2017). Turkey's rivalries with its Mediterranean neighbours Israel, Egypt, and the UAE have contributed to a complex set of alliance politics between Greece and these countries, enhancing the disputes over sovereignty. In tandem with the ongoing Cyprus

dispute, the Eastern Mediterranean has increasingly become a region of tension.

In accordance with their claims about maritime zones, Greece and Turkey have engaged in resource exploration activities. The RoC started exploratory drillings in its claimed EEZ in 2011 and announced new licensing rounds for drilling in 2012. Turkey issued a NAVTEX in January 2015 and later in March 2017 for exploration drillings in areas that are also claimed by the RoC. In 2019, Turkey sent seismic research vessels into waters claimed by the Republic of Cyprus. In the same year, Turkey submitted to the UN a maritime deal it signed with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya and signed a Security and Military Cooperation Agreement with the same country. Greece, on the other hand, signed a partial agreement over maritime border with Egypt in August 2020. The Turkish-Libyan and Greek-Egyptian maritime deals mutually conflict with the claimed maritime jurisdictions of each set of countries. Greece also signed a defence accord with the United Arab Emirates in 2020.

These tensions reached their climax after a minor collision between Turkish and Greek frigates in summer 2020, leading to the most severe crisis between the two countries since the Imia/Kardak crisis of 1996 in the Aegean. In August 2020, Turkey sent a survey vessel (Oruç Reis) escorted by warships with the purpose of exploring oil and gas drilling. The vessel was followed by Greek frigates as it crossed the area from Cyprus to Crete. A mild collision took place between one of the Turkish warships and Greek frigates. Greece called the collision as an accident while Turkey accused Greece of an act of provocation. In September 2020, Greece deployed naval units on the island of Kastellorizo and announced military exercises with a NAVTEX in Chios, in violation of the demilitarized status of the island, conducted firing exercises on and around the island of Limnos. In December 2020, the UAE and Greece held military exercises off the coast of Alexandria (Al Monitor, 2020).

Relations between Greece and Turkey also strained over Turkey's exclusion from emerging regional cooperation fora that accelerated in the second half of 2010s. Early signs of exclusion were given when plans of the Eastern Mediterranean gas pipeline (EastMed pipeline), a project between Greece, the RoC, and Israel, became public in 2013. The accord for the pipeline was signed in January 2020. Turkey is also excluded from the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (East Med Forum), informally active since January 2019 and formally established in September 2020. The EastMed Forum, composed of Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, France, and Italy, seeks to enhance cooperation amongst its members for the exploration and consumption of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, the EastMed Forum was formed with Italian encouragement as a response to Turkey's escalation in response to Italian marketing activities of Egyptian natural gas since 2015. Turkey is also excluded from the Philia (Friendship) Forum that was convened in Athens on 11 February 2021 with the participation of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Greece, the RoC, Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and France. The timing of the Philia Forum, right after the 61<sup>st</sup> round of exploratory talks between the two countries in January 2021, signaled Greece's preference for stepping up its containment policy towards Turkey rather than adopting a more cooperative approach. Indeed, Greece's assertion over its positions came from another front, too. A few days before the exploratory meetings in late January 2021, Greece expanded its territorial waters in the Ionian Sea from 6 to 12 miles after negotiations with Italy and Albania. This move constituted an indirect warning towards Turkey (DW, 2021), signaling that Greece is assertive in its willingness to extend its territorial waters to both in the Aegean and in the Mediterranean.

### **Conflict Analysis**

Having provided the context regarding recent developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, the following part offers an analysis of the situation in the region with a focus on Greek-Turkish relations based

on three main dimensions: actors, dividers and connectors, and drivers of conflict and peace. While a multiplicity of actors and their interests are central to the developments in the region, the analysis here is limited to main adversaries that hold great actorness potential with regards to efforts to build cooperative relations and develop models for efficient extraction and transport of energy resources.

### **Actors**

In conflict analysis, the interests and power positions of key actors have a defining impact on how different groups interact with each other and their relations. Therefore, the positions and interests of key actors are central in mobilizing different groups around cooperative or competitive relations. In conflict analysis, the analysis of main stakeholders involves several dimensions: parties, positions, interests, issues/problems, means of influence/power, and willingness to negotiate. The Eastern Mediterranean is home to a number of states as actors in the recent developments, including Greece, Turkey, RoC, TRNC, Israel, Egypt, Libya, and Lebanon. Besides the regional states, the EU and member states such as France and Italy are stakeholders having economic and political interests in the region. The US constitutes a powerful out-of-the-region country with stakes in the discovery of energy resources. The US adopted the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act in December 2019, weighting in this way in favor of the East Med Pipeline and on the side of the RoC. As part of the partnership act, the US eventually lifted the decades-old restrictions on arms sale to the RoC in September 2020.

Here, the focus is on Greece, Turkey, the RoC, and the TRNC as main stakeholders. Greece and Turkey are kin-states to the RoC and the TRNC respectively. The RoC is a fully recognized state that is not recognized only by Turkey while the TRNC is only recognized by Turkey. Greece and the RoC are EU member states. The countries are entangled with the four-decades long Cyprus issue regarding the de facto partition of the island following a military intervention by



Turkey in 1974. Furthermore, Greece and Turkey are entangled in a dispute over a number of issues, including disagreements over the definition of EEZ in the Aegean Sea and the demilitarization of Aegean islands.

**Table 1: Actors’ Positions, Interests, Issues, Means of Influence, and Willingness to Negotiate in the Eastern Mediterranean**

	<b>Positions</b>	<b>Interests</b>	<b>Issues/ Problems</b>	<b>Means of influence/ power</b>	<b>Willingness to negotiate</b>
<b>Greece</b>	Definition of sea borders in accordance with UNCLOS	Expansion of EEZ Balancing against/ deterring Turkey	Threat perceptions from Turkey	EU membership Regional alliances (Egypt, Israel)	Low
<b>Turkey</b>	Rejection of UNCLOS Recognition of TRNC's EEZ	Exploitation of energy resources Aspiration to become regional power and an energy hub Protection of TRNC interests	Tensions with other regional states (e.g., Egypt, Israel) Exclusion from regional alliances such as EAST-MED	Military power Regional alliances (Libya)	High (Low since 2019)
<b>Republic of Cyprus (RoC)</b>	RoC's sea borders representing the island as a whole	Balancing against/ deterring Turkey Protection of sea borders	Insecurity emanating from Turkey	EU membership Regional alliances	Low
<b>Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)</b>	Recognition of TRNC's sea borders and EEZ	Full recognition of TRNC and sea borders	De facto status/ unrecognition	Turkish military power	High (Low since 2019)

Turkey’s assertive approach to defending its maritime interests especially since 2019 has been driven by two main frustrations (ICG,

2021): its belief that Turkish Cypriots are excluded from potential energy riches, and, secondly, that other Mediterranean states are pursuing a containment policy against her. Turkey's position in the region rests on the rejection of UNCLOS and her call for recognition of TRNC's EEZ. The main interests underlying this position are the exploitation of energy resources and the aspiration to become a regional power and an energy hub for the region (Aydın & Dizdaroğlu, 2018). Based on these two main interests, Turkey is seen as having an offensive agenda in the Eastern Mediterranean (Axt, 2021). As a kin-state to the TRNC, Turkey also has an interest in the protection of TRNC interests including her sea borders and EEZ. Based on these interests, Turkey's main issues of concern are the tensions with other regional states (especially Egypt and Israel) and her exclusion from regional alliances especially since 2020. Turkey's main means of influence remains her military power, as revealed by her search and drilling activities since mid-2010s escorted by military frigates and gunboats. Turkey's shift to a coercive diplomacy in the region stemmed also from her sense of growing isolation from its NATO allies and also from the US after the lack of a robust response towards the 2016 coup attempt (Tanchum, 2021). Turkey's purpose in declaring its maritime deal with Libya in 2019 was to pressure the international community and countries in the region to an equitable settlement of maritime boundaries and by extension of resource-related activities (Tanchum, 2021).

Turkey's policy discourse towards Greece and Cyprus since 2017 has increasingly shifted to conflictual security frame (İpek & Gür, 2021), adopting an increasingly assertive, securitised and conflictual approach (Baysal & Dizdaroğlu, 2022). In line with this assertive approach, the Turkish government presented the doctrine of Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*) in 2019 as an irredentist doctrine of national defence. With this doctrine, Turkey assumes a greater maritime role, feeling that she has been let down by its Western allies in Syria and elsewhere (Taş, 2022). The Blue Homeland map was illustrated during

an official celebration in 2019, depicting maritime boundaries comprising of 462,000 square kilometres and excluding out Cyprus and main Greek islands in the Aegean and Kastellorizo (Taş, 2022). The doctrine has resonated well with ultranationalist views in Turkey that are being fed with Greece's maximalist claims in the region. Greece's maximalist position is most prevalent in relation to the island of Kastellorizo: an island of two kilometers off the coast of Turkey that is 570 kilometers away from Greek mainland and measures 10 square kilometers is seen as entitled to EEZ generating 40 thousand square kilometers of maritime jurisdiction, leaving Turkey with 41 thousand square kilometers. These maximalist claims feed into the irredentist claims of Mavi Marmara espoused by ultranationalist views within the Turkish state (Çandar, 2020).

The TRNC contests maritime delimitation agreements by the RoC on the grounds that they do not represent the interests of the Turkish Cypriots. The main position of the de facto entity is the recognition its EEZ while the underlying interest is its full recognition as a state. The main problem with regards to the entity's position in the region is its unrecognized status and the fact that the conflict on the island remains unresolved since the 1970s. The TRNC mainly relies on Turkey's military power as a means of influence in the region. TRNC's willingness to negotiate remains low as a result of the unchanging positions of Greece and RoC regarding the status of the island. The TRNC has proposed on several occasions to work jointly with the RoC on developing the island's natural gas resources in 2011 and 2012 with no positive response by the RoC (Çıraklı, 2021). More recently in 2019, the TRNC President Mustafa Akinci proposed the establishment of a joint committee under the supervision of the UN, a proposal supported by Turkey, with no response from the RoC side.

Greece has focused on a strategy of strengthening international alliances with two main aims (ICG, 2021): deterring Turkey's assertive military posturing and countering a unilateral revision of the status quo by Turkey in the region. In order to strengthen its geopolitical

outlook as a small country in the region, Greece has developed five trilateral cooperation schemes in the Eastern Mediterranean involving the RoC: with Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan on a broad range of issues and at different levels including working groups and ministerial meetings (Tsardanidis, 2019). Greece's main position in the region rests on the recognition of EEZ in accordance with UNCLOS. Her main interests are balancing against Turkey in the region and also expanding the EEZ in accordance with UNCLOS (Kastellorizo). The main problem that the country faces in the region is threat perceptions emanating from Turkey's assertive approach. Greece has accused Turkey for engaging in revisionist, neo-Ottoman expansion agenda through gunboat tactics. Greece signed EEZ delimitation agreements with Italy in July 2020 and with Egypt in August 2020, confirming UNCLOS as the applicable law. Furthermore, Greece sees the EastMed pipeline as a means to protect and secure Greek sovereignty. In terms of means of influence, Greece mainly seeks to exert influence in the region through alliances with other regional countries and also through the EU. Being an EU member state along with the RoC, Greece has received the backing of the EU and member states such as France and Italy in her regional endeavors to protect her interests. Greece's willingness to negotiate is low, as she prefers arbitration through international courts for the solution of EEZ disputes with Turkey (including the dispute in the Aegean).

The RoC's main position is that she is entitled to represent the island as a whole in terms of the definition of sea borders. RoC's main interests include balancing against Turkey's assertive regional policy and protection of EEZ borders established through bilateral agreements with other countries in the region. With this purpose, the RoC has developed strategic ties with Israel since early 2010s, coinciding with Turkey's straining relations with the same country. In December 2010 the RoC and Israel signed a maritime boundary agreement demarcating their respective EEZs. RoC also secured a deal with Egypt with the aim of excluding the option for Turkey being the

transit country for gas although this was the cheapest option, because that would create dependency on Turkey and potentially compromise its sovereignty (Proedrou, 2021). RoC's main problem is insecurity emanating from Turkey. Main means of influence are- parallel to Greece- EU membership and alliances that the country has been building with states in the region since early 2000s. The RoC's willingness for negotiation is low. In line with these interests, RoC's priority in the region has been the establishment of the EastMed gas pipeline that would ship Cypriot gas to Greece and to Italy. EastMed would carry both Cypriot and Israeli gas, bringing in Greece as a transit state, building up a strategic alliance between RoC-Greece-Israel, and also building an infrastructure that the international community would have vested interest in protecting (Proedrou, 2021).

### ***Dividers and Connectors***

Dividers and connectors, referring to potential sources of polarization and cohesion between groups respectively, for a basic aspect of conflict analysis (Levinger, 2013, p. 95). Dividers are like fault lines that already exist in a society and with a trigger can easily escalate and cause earthquake, meaning that they can cause or exacerbate conflictual situations. Dividers and connectors are not only based on objective conditions but also on subjective perceptions of main actors in a conflict. Different actors might perceive different issues or processes as dividers and as connectors. Furthermore, dividers and connectors are dynamic and might change in different periods during the course of a conflict. Overall, dividers and connectors are changing categories that might polarize or promote cohesion in different periods within a conflict process.

Five main dividers and connectors are assessed here. First, *strategic dividers and connectors* refer to issues related to security and power (Levinger, 2013, p. 35). Second, *political dividers and connectors* refer to political power issues and institutional performance (Levinger, 2013, p. 38). Here, the regime type is important. While democratic institutions

might serve as connectors, non-democratic institutions might serve as dividers. Especially, authoritarian regimes suppressing opposition do not perform well for balancing interests and allowing competing voices to be heard. (Levinger, 2013, p. 38). Third, *socioeconomic dividers and connectors* refer to economic and social variables that might exacerbate conflict or might function as a means to mitigate conflict between opposing groups (Levinger, 2013, p. 40). Fourth, *psychological dividers and connectors* refer to mutual perceptions that may escalate or de-escalate conflict among rival groups. These include factors such as leaders' personal characteristics, perceptions of counterparts, communication patterns, and status competition (Levinger, 2013, p. 43). Fifth, *cultural dividers and connectors* involve issues of ideology, group identity, and religion (Levinger, 2013, p. 49). Cultural differences do not automatically translate into conflict but might form the basis for conflict in case they are constructed in a competitive and divisive manner.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, strategic dividers and connectors involve a number of issues. Firstly, disagreements over EEZs and competing sovereignty claims constitute a core strategic divider. Competing claims between Greece and Turkey cross cut their claims in the Aegean Sea and are also intrinsically linked to the status of Cyprus as a divided island. Regional competition for power, involving the main states of the region such as Israel, Egypt, Libya along with Greece and Turkey constitutes a second strategic driver for conflict. Already existing competition between Egypt and Libya, Turkey and Israel, and Turkey and Egypt constitute a strategic divider. Another strategic divider is related to Turkey's EU integration process. The stalling of accession negotiations in the 2010s has undermined cooperative relations between Turkey and EU members states. Finally, Turkey's hesitations for signing the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) agreement can be assessed as a strategic divider. Turkey is not a party to UNCLOS because the treaty's treatment of islands puts her in a disadvantaged position in relation to Greece

especially with regards to the Aegean Sea. In May 1995, Greece ratified UNCLOS with the purpose of supporting its intention to increase its territorial waters from 6 to 12 nautical miles in the Aegean. Ever since, Turkey has supported the position that islands do not generate full maritime zones and therefore are not entitled to 12 nautical mile territorial waters. On the other hand, a main strategic connector is the two countries' NATO membership. A further strategic connector is the EU and prospects for revival of Turkey's accession negotiations. Despite the stalling of the process since 2010s, EU membership still constitutes a strategic interest for Turkey and occasionally emerges in domestic political discourse as a reference point for mobilizing constituencies.

Regarding political aspects, democratic backsliding and increasing authoritarianism in Turkey can be seen as a central political divider (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016) precluding cooperative foreign policy in the region. Another political divider is related to tensions rising from the treatment of mutual minorities in the two countries, namely the Muslim minority in Western Thrace in Greece and the Greek Orthodox minority in Turkey. Political connectors include the preservation of democratic institutions despite setbacks (especially in Turkey). Both Greece and Turkey have preserved democratic institutions despite periods of democratic backsliding. A related political connector is the positive transformation of civil-military relations in Turkey as a result of the EU-induced democratization reforms that were realized during the first half of 2000s.

Socioeconomic dividers include economic stagnation and related socioeconomic inequalities. Both countries have been facing economic stagnation in recent years, with Greece having been severely affected by the 2008 economic crisis and subsequent austerity measures imposed by the EU and Turkey entering a cycle of economic instability since the mid-2010s. The economic crises in both countries exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities. Another socioeconomic divider is the changing demographic structure in both countries as a result of

refugee flows and irregular migration. Since the start of Syrian civil war in 2011, both Greece and Turkey have received an exponential number of refugees and irregular migrants seeking to find refuge in Europe. Turkey is one of the countries hosting the highest number of refugees around the world and constitutes a main transit country for migrants aiming to migrate to EU and other European countries through its neighbor Greece. Socioeconomic connectors include expanding trade relations between the two countries (OEC, 2022). Another socioeconomic connector is the increasing tourism flows (CEIC, 2022). Both the volume of trade and tourism flows between the two countries have been rising in the last two decades, constituting an important socioeconomic connector.

Cultural dividers include religion and associated cultural differences. Greece is a predominantly Christian Orthodox country while Turkey is predominantly Sunni Muslim. This is reflected in cultural differences in lifestyle and worldviews. Cultural connectors include common historical ties dating back to the Ottoman period. A second cultural connector are commonalities in language emanating from the common past. Although modern Greek and Turkish constitute separate language families, there is cross-fertilization in everyday language.

Psychological dividers include mutual threat perception that has its historical roots in the Ottoman period and its dissolution. Enemy stereotypes in Greek collective memory are based on the struggle of nation-building as a battle against Ottoman rule starting after the collapse of the Byzantine Empire in the 15<sup>th</sup> century until the Greek independence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For the Turkish side, the war of independence was fought at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century against Greek expansion and irredentism (summed up as the 'Great Idea/ Megali Idea' constitute a memory of defeats and loss (Axt, 2021). More recently, the Cyprus question since the 1970s, crises in the Aegean in the 1990s, and mutual restrictive policies with regards to minority rights have contributed to threat perceptions in the two countries. A closely associated psychological divider is mutual distrust emanating



from past disputes and issues of controversy. On the other hand, an important psychological connector is societal level trust. A recent public opinion poll revealed that despite rising tensions in the last five years, majority of Greeks and Turks support the idea that Greek-Turkish disputes can be resolved through dialogue and conciliation (ELIAMEP, 2022).

Overall, the dividers and connectors are summarized in Table 2:

**Table 2: Dividers and Connectors between Greece and Turkey**

	<b>Dividers</b>	<b>Connectors</b>
<b>Strategic</b>	-EEZ and sovereignty disputes -Regional competition for power -Competition for natural resources -Stalling of EU process for Turkey -Turkey’s abstention from UNCLOS	-NATO membership -Turkey’s EU aspirations -Cooperation in the area of migration
<b>Political</b>	-Rising authoritarianism -Domestic political tensions -Treatment of minorities	-Maintenance of democratic institutions -Balanced civil-military relations
<b>Socioeconomic</b>	-Economic stagnation -Increasing socioeconomic inequalities -Demographic changes related to migration	-Trade -Tourism
<b>Cultural</b>	-Religion -East-West cultural divide	-Shared historical past -Commonalities in language
<b>Psychological</b>	-Constant threat perception -Mutual distrust	-Societal level trust

***Drivers of Conflict and Peace***

Drivers of conflict and peace refer to the questions of how do key actors within a conflict use dividers to promote conflict and how do actors use connectors to promote peace, respectively. They refer to the dynamic situation resulting from key actors’ mobilization of social groups around core grievances such as the perception that a group’s security is threatened, and institutional resilience, widely referring to the perception that social structures for mitigating the conflict and promoting cohesion are at place within a society (ICAF 2008).

Regarding the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, drivers of conflict are more prominent compared to drivers of peace. First and foremost, the existence of competitive political discourse has been a prominent feature of the Greek-Turkish-Cypriot relations over the last

two decades. Political actors in both states have maintained traditional nationalistic discourse emphasizing antagonism rather than cooperation with the neighboring state. Constant threat perception and mutual distrust have been core elements of political discourse in relation to the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean since 2018.

Recent energy discoveries constitute another driver for conflict. Main political actors frame energy discoveries within competing claims of sovereignty and sea borders, connected with perennial disputes over the Aegean Sea and Cyprus. This situation has been exacerbated as a result of alliance-building: how political leaders are building competitive alliances with the purpose of undermining competitor states and supporting an offensive approach. Rising security concerns in relation to EEZ delimitation and regional alliances have contributed to a security-oriented confrontational strategy instead of economic cooperation prospects (Demiryol, 2019). Recent securitization studies have pointed to energy consisting a distinct policy domain and sector that interacts with other security domains including military, political, economic, social, and environmental (Christou & Adamides, 2013). From this perspective, insecurities related to energy can have the potential to escalate to existential threats for states (Baysal & Dizdaroğlu, 2022; İşeri, 2019). Indeed, the Mediterranean region has been characterized as an (in)security complex, considering political, cultural, and socio-economic heterogeneity stemming from historical divisions in the region (İşeri, 2019). Unless constructive steps are taken for including all riparian states in inclusive partnerships, energy discoveries will likely constitute drivers for conflict rather than peace (İşeri & Bartan, 2019).

On the other hand, existing institutional structures have the potential of functioning as drivers of peace in the region. Especially, the role of the EU and NATO and political leaders' potential for mobilizing based on membership/association to these institutions constitute crucial drivers for peace. The role of such institutions as a driver for peace became apparent, for example, after Germany's diplomatic initiative

and NATO's call for technical dialogue in relation to rising tensions between the two countries after the 2020 collision and subsequent tensions. The EU Council, that was convened in October 2020, while reiterated its solidarity with its members Greece and Cyprus over developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and issued a warning for Turkey, also pointed to a positive political Turkey-EU agenda and continued cooperation in areas including trade and migration issues. Accordingly, energy discoveries still have the potential for becoming drivers for peace if existing institutional structures prepare the ground for cooperative relations. Regional alliances that would prioritize efficient exploitation of resources and the establishment of cooperative mechanisms for the extraction of resources can prove a driver for peace in the region.

### **Conclusion: Prospects for Conflict and Peace in the Eastern Mediterranean**

This study provided an analysis of the recent developments in the Eastern Mediterranean based on conflict analysis framework provided by Levinger (2013) with the purpose of assessing prospects for peace and conflict in the region. The article analyzed such prospects with a focus on Greece and Turkey as main stakeholders along three main dimensions: actors, dividers and connectors, and drivers for conflict and peace. Overall, the analysis revealed that while actors present competing interests and are divided over strategic, political, socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological lines, points for cooperation still exist. Energy resource discoveries in the region have exacerbated disagreements over sea borders and sovereignty and have yet to contribute to the establishment of cooperative relations. However, such discoveries do not only have the potential for interstate cooperation but also domestic prosperity of the states in the region (Shaffer, 2018). Therefore, assessing possible pathways for addressing tensions and also integrating international legal frameworks (Stanic & Karbuz, 2021) and looking for possible negotiation frameworks could

act as a basis for developing cooperation based on joint economic interests rather than short term political aspirations.

Several policy recommendations for enhancing drivers of peace and lowering the strength of drivers of conflict can be assessed. Greece should reconsider her containment policy towards Turkey and refrain from moves that would further trigger security concerns of its neighbor. A way forward would be to work on ways to integrate Turkey into the Mediterranean forums that have been established in the last few years. This might come after strengthening bilateral relations through new high-level meetings and commitments for lowering tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, increasing the frequency of back-channel meetings will be key for discussing possible ways forward in relation to both the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey, on her part, should reconsider her assertive and hard power-based Mediterranean policy not only in relation to Greece but also in relation to its other Mediterranean neighbors and take steps for normalization. Recently, signs for normalization of relations with Egypt came after the initiation of exploratory talks in May 2021. Signs for normalization of relations with Israel were given after the visit of President of Israel Isaac Herzog to Turkey in March 2022. Similar normalization steps should also be taken in relation to Greece.

Finally, the EU's role in the Greek-Turkish relations and dialogue remains essential. The EU should seek balance between the interests of Greece and Cyprus as its member states and Turkey's interests and claims as an associate member. Reviving EU-Turkey relations with regards to accession negotiations would be an effective way of incentivizing Turkey for a more cooperative stance. Additionally, the EU could be instrumental in building a regional forum that would involve Turkey and Greece along with other Mediterranean countries. This forum can work on cooperation in various areas, including energy, migration, and trade, where interests intersect and prospects for cooperation can be high.

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