



TÜRKİYE’İN KIBRIS MESELESİNE VE DOĞU AKDENİZ SORUNUNA KARŞI DEĞİŞEN POLİTİKALARI

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Abstract

A main objective of this article is to examine the underlying reasons behind the collapse of the reunification talks on Cyprus aimed at a federal model. Another aim of the article is to analyze Türkiye’s assertive policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. A major argument is that the disruption of the balance of power with respect to the Cyprus problem in favor of the Greek Cypriots after 2004 and the lack of a shared Cypriot identity were fundamental causes of the failure of the talks. The study also contends that the emergence of a siege mentality after the July 2016 coup plot in Türkiye, together with its economic and military strengthening, the rise of multi-polarity in international politics, and diminishing EU political sway in the country, incentivized Türkiye to pursue an active foreign policy agenda in the Eastern Mediterranean. This study concludes that the failure of long-standing negotiations to reach a federal settlement on the island and the comfortable position obtained by the Greek Cypriot Administration (GCA) in the negotiations vis-à-vis the Turkish side following the accession to the EU together with Türkiye’s nationalist posture after 2016 and the deepening of the identity dilemma among the Greek and Turkish Cypriots over the course of time induced Türkiye to shelve a federal solution to the Cyprus issue and return to a pre-2002 two-state solution. The article also concludes that Türkiye was further prompted to take an independent course in the Eastern Mediterranean by the combination of a number of factors: the rapprochement between the AKP Government and nationalist elements in the country after the 2016 coup plot, the militarization of its foreign policy, Türkiye’s perception that the West was in decline, the decreased credibility and thus leverage over Türkiye of EU political conditionality, Brussels’ shortcomings regarding a common security and foreign policy and the rise in Türkiye’s military and economic capabilities.

Keywords: Energy, the EU, Turkish foreign policy, Cyprus.

JEL Classification Codes : F51, F52, F59

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Öz

Bu makalenin ana amaçlarından birisi federal bir modeli hedefleyen Kıbrıs’ın yeniden birleşme müzakerelerinin çökmesinin ardındaki temel nedenleri incelemektir. Makalenin başka bir amacı Türkiye’nin Doğu Akdeniz’deki etkin politikasını analiz etmektir. Makalenin temel argümanı 2004’ten sonra Kıbrıs probleminde güç dengesinin Kıbrıslı Rumlar lehine bozulmasının ve ortak bir Kıbrıs kimliğinin eksikliğinin görüşmelerin başarısızlığının temel sebepleri olduğudur. Çalışma Temmuz 2016’da Türkiye’deki darbe girişiminden sonra ortaya çıkan kuşatma mantalitesinin, Türkiye’nin ekonomik ve askeri olarak güçlenmesinin, uluslararası politikada çok kutupluluğun ortaya çıkışının ve ülkede AB’nin siyasi etkisinin azalmasının Türkiye’yi Doğu Akdeniz’de aktif bir dış politika izlemeye teşvik ettiğini ileri sürmektedir. Bu çalışma adada federal bir çözüme ulaşmak için uzun süredir devam eden müzakerelerin başarısızlığı ve Kıbrıs Rum Yönetimi’nin AB’ye katıldıktan sonra müzakerelerde Türkiye’ye karşı rahat bir pozisyon elde etmesinin yanında 2016’dan sonra Türkiye’nin milliyetçi bir tutuma sahip olmasının ve zamanla Kıbrıs Türkleri ve Rumları arasında kimlik ikileminin derinleşmesinin Türkiye’nin Kıbrıs meselesine federal bir çözümü rafa kaldırmasına ittiği ve onu 2002 öncesi iki devletli çözüme geri döndürdüğü sonucuna varmıştır. Makale, aynı zamanda, birkaç faktörün bir araya gelmesinin Doğu Akdeniz’de Türkiye’nin bağımsız bir yola girmesine yol açtığı sonucuna varmaktadır : 2016 darbe girişiminden sonra AKP Hükümeti’yle ülkedeki milliyetçi unsurlar arasındaki yakınlaşma, dış politikanın askerileşmesi, Türkiye’nin Batı’nın inişte olduğu konusundaki algısı, AB siyasi koşulluğunun azalan inandırıcılığı ve Türkiye üzerindeki azalan manivela gücü, Brüksel’in ortak bir güvenlik ve dış politika konusundaki eksikleri ve Türkiye’nin askeri ve ekonomik yeteneklerindeki artış.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Enerji, AB, Türk dış politikası, Kıbrıs.

JEL Sınıflandırma Kodları : F51, F52, F59

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Introduction

Türkiye had sought to maintain the status quo in Cyprus until 1999, when the official declaration of Türkiye as an EU candidate for membership in 1999 served as a game changer, incentivizing it to take an active stance toward settling the Cyprus imbroglio through negotiation. The acceptance of the Annan Plan by 65 percent of the Turkish Cypriots in a simultaneous referendum on April 24, 2004, however, was mirrored by the 76 percent of the Greek Cypriots who rejected it. This became a milestone in terms of the negotiated settlement of the Cyprus problem, increasing the leverage of the Greek Cypriot Administration (GCA) over the Cyprus issue as it entered the EU, representing the whole island. After that, numerous meetings between the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and the GCA produced little. Endless negotiations under the auspices of the UN finally induced Türkiye to adopt a new approach, a *paradigmatic change*, in which it sought international recognition of the TRNC.

Türkiye also espoused a new policy on the energy issue in the Eastern Mediterranean. After 2017, Türkiye took an assertive line, militarily obstructing the exploration of natural gas by foreign energy firms around Cyprus. The energy issue in the Eastern Mediterranean is closely linked with the resolution of the Cyprus conflict in that Türkiye has insisted that the exploration activities in the Eastern Mediterranean hinge upon the settlement of the Cyprus issue.

The main objective of this article is to investigate the fundamental reasons for the failure of the reunification talks aimed at resolving the Cyprus issue on a federal basis, as well as the factors that precipitated Türkiye's assertive policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. The article primarily argues that the absence of a common Cypriot identity on the island and the disruption of the balance of power over the Cyprus dispute in favor of the Greek Cypriots are underlying reasons for the failure of the reunification negotiations. It further asserts that the development of a siege mentality following the July 2016 coup plot, the enhancement of Türkiye's material (economic and military) capabilities, the power vacuum left with the partial withdrawal of the US from the Eastern Mediterranean, increasing multi-polarity in global politics, and the weakening EU political conditionality over Türkiye all combined to lead the latter to embrace an active policy in the Eastern Mediterranean.

This study addresses some gaps in the literature. First, the paradigmatic change in Turkish policy on the Cyprus issue is a recent development; to the best of my knowledge, no studies examining it have yet been published. Similarly, few studies have analysed Türkiye's new policy towards the Eastern Mediterranean issue. The study considers three main research questions, thus: What are the major factors that led to the failure of the reunification talks on a federal model in Cyprus? What are the positions of the TRNC and GCA on the main problems regarding the settlement of the Cyprus issue? What are the underlying reasons for Türkiye's ambitious policy in the Eastern Mediterranean in recent years?

The first part of the article deals with the diverging positions of the parties on the main aspects of the Cyprus problem. The wide gap between the Turkish and Greek sides regarding the characteristics of the new state, political equality and effective participation, property, population, territory, security guarantees and the deployment of Turkish troops in the north of the island thwarted any settlement of the problem on the basis of a federal model.

The second section elucidates Türkiye's efforts to adopt a new Cyprus policy. The failure of the Crans-Montana negotiations in July 2017 to reunify the island compelled Türkiye to return to pre-2002 Denктаş-era policies on Cyprus. Thus, Türkiye underwent a paradigmatic change in which it took a number of steps to ensure a two-state solution for the island. These included the construction of new administrative buildings, the signing of a financial and economic protocol with the TRNC in 2002, an increase in Türkiye's cooperation with the TRNC to better protect maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, the establishment of a military airport in Geçitkale, the opening of the

coastal area of Maraş (Varosha) on October 8, 2020, the submission of a six-article proposal by TRNC President Ersin Tatar and an attempt to gain international support for the independence of the TRNC.

The third section considers the causes of the changing Turkish policy on the Cyprus problem, drawing attention to the continuing absence of a common identity on the island, weak incentives for a negotiated settlement of the problem and the comfortable position of the GCA following its accession to the EU. These factors all complicated the search for a federal solution and contributed to Türkiye's turning a cold shoulder to such an approach.

The fourth part stresses Türkiye's ambitious stance in the Eastern Mediterranean. This section emphasises its activities there as shaped by sovereignty issues rather than economic interests. In other words, the motivations to safeguard both its own and the TRNC's independent rights induced Türkiye to take an active stance in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Finally, the fifth section sheds light on Türkiye's policy shift regarding the Eastern Mediterranean, stressing the role of the changing conditions. The Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) Government's forging a coalition with the nationalists following the July 2016 coup attempt and concomitant militarisation of Turkish foreign policy combined with the resurrection of the *Sèvres* syndrome and the perception by the Turkish political elite that the West is in terminal decline to pave the way for a self-reliant Turkish policy. Further, the declining political leverage of Brussels over Ankara due to the disagreement over the Cyprus issue as well as internal and external problems concerning the EU more generally provided Türkiye with room for manoeuvre for a go-it-alone policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. This was also facilitated by the expansion of Türkiye's material capabilities.

1. Irreconcilable Positions

Numerous negotiations were held under the auspices of the UN between 1974 and 2002 aimed at resolving the Cyprus issue, but without success. After 2002, efforts to settle the issue accelerated. The objective of the negotiations was to establish a united Cyprus with bicomunal political equality and single sovereignty, citizenship, and international status. However, in spite of the countless talks, the efforts to achieve this failed on some sensitive questions. One such was how to create the new state. According to the Turkish Cypriots, the new state should be made by two equal founding states and have a different name from "the Republic of Cyprus." The Turkish side wanted a "virgin birth," signifying the establishment of an entirely new state. This idea was not agreed by the Greek side, who proposed that the new state be created through the evolution of the GCA into a federal state (Cyprus Mail, 2016).

Another controversial issue was political equality and effective participation, involving a veto power by the TRNC over the decisions to be made by the new state. According to the GCA, this would paralyze the functioning of the state. Also, the Turkish Cypriots objected to the election of the deputy president by all the Cypriots, anxious in case this enabled the Greek Cypriots to secure victory for their candidate. Moreover, the idea of a rotating presidency, whereby a Greek Cypriot would serve as the president for two years and a Turkish Cypriot for one, was essential for political equality, according to the Turkish Cypriots (Demirci, 2018). The parties further disagreed about which party minister of foreign affairs would be chosen and how to conduct foreign affairs as well as how relations with mainland Türkiye and Greece were to be conducted (Congressional Research Service, 2019: 28).

Another difficult subject was that of property. Following the 1974 Turkish military intervention, 150,000 Greek Cypriots fled to the south of the island, and 50,000 Turkish Cypriots fled to the north. The GCA argued that the right to decide how to resolve property issues should be granted to the first owner of the properties, whereas the TRNC opined that this right should be given to the

last owner (Congressional Research Service, 2019: 29). In 2005, the TRNC set up the Immovable Property Commission in order to evaluate the Greek Cypriots' property claims. Despite the objection of the GCA, 7,159 Greek Cypriots applied to this commission. The Immovable Property Commission examined their claims and sought to settle these demands through compensation, restitution, or exchange (Arslan, 2022).

Regarding the issue of property, the Greek Cypriots demanded the return of Güzelyurt (Morphou) as a confidence-building measure, but this suggestion was turned down by the TRNC. Currently, the Turkish Cypriots own 37 percent of the island. Greek Cypriots wanted this to be reduced to 28.2 percent and the return of 90,000 displaced Greek Cypriots to the territories that would be returned by the TRNC (Congressional Research Service, 2019: 30). Moreover, the Greek Cypriots wanted the return of Maraş and some parts of Gazimağusa (Famagusta). The areas, which were inhabited by the Greek Cypriots, should largely come under the control of the GCA or else become enclaves under the GCA, they argued. Additionally, the Greek Cypriots demanded the return of the eastern part of the island, including Karpaz (Karpasia).

The parties seemed to be on the same page as regards the question of population. It was agreed that the number of Turkish Cypriots slated to live in the areas controlled by the TRNC would be 220,000 while the number of Greek Cypriots to live in the areas owned by the GCA would be 802,000. Also, the Turkish Cypriots agreed to their ownership of 29.2 percent of the island. However, they rejected the creation of enclaves and would only accept the return of 65,000–72,000 of the Greek Cypriots to their former territories. The Turkish Cypriots consented to the Greek Cypriot demands for more coastal areas, but only if the coastlines were turned into green areas (Congressional Research Service, 2019: 30-31). The talks ended when the parties failed to reach an agreement on these points in Mont Pelerin and Geneva (Congressional Research Service, 2019: 32).

Other issues to be resolved that were as problematic as property and territory were security guarantees and the deployment of Turkish troops in the north of the island. These issues caused the collapse of the negotiations in both Geneva in January 2017 and Crans Montana the following July. The GCA stated that the Turkish troops should leave the island once an agreement was signed. According to the Greek Cypriots, the UN or the EU could provide the security guarantee instead of the Turkish forces (Cyprus News Agency, 2008). President of the TRNC Ersin Tatar, however, contended that since Brussels had remained silent about the persecution of the Bosnians in its backyard in the former Yugoslavia in 1995, this guarantorship was out of the question (Özertem, 2021: 8). President Nicos Anastasiades proposed that security in the new federal state could be provided by multi-national police forces (Hadjicostis, 2017). The Turkish side, on the other hand, maintained that the continuation of the 1960 Agreements of Security and Alliance was necessary in view of past intercommunal conflicts (Daily Sabah, 2017). Therefore, the Greek Cypriots' suggestion of "zero troops, zero guarantees" was unacceptable. Instead, Türkiye suggested the establishment of a small security contingent and the reduction of the number of Turkish troops over 10–15 years. The Greek Cypriots insisted that Türkiye should only deploy a small number of troops in the north for only a period (Congressional Research Service, 2019: 33-34).

2. Returning to the Traditional Cyprus Policy

After the negotiations in Crans-Montana failed in July 2017, Türkiye started to change its stance with respect to the resolution of the Cyprus conflict. The fact that the Cyprus question had still not been resolved after so many years precipitated its proposal of a two-state solution. This new approach—or paradigmatic change—was facilitated by the election of Tatar in the October 2020 TRNC presidential elections, whose views on the Cyprus issue were close to those of the AKP

Government in Ankara and the subsequent formation of a new government, in December 2020, under the prime ministership of Ersan Saner.

Türkiye has accelerated its efforts to turn the TRNC into an independent state on the basis of a two-state solution. It announced that a new parliament and presidential building would be constructed there and, on June 3, 2021, signed an agreement to advance economic and commercial cooperation with the TRNC. It also signed a protocol on economic and financial cooperation in 2022 aimed at helping the TRNC to stand on its own feet economically (Arslan, 2020) and intensified its cooperation with the TRNC to better safeguard maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean; thus, the TRNC granted licenses to Turkish vessels to explore natural gas around Cyprus. Türkiye established a military airport in Geçitkale for the use of unmanned aerial vehicles and unmanned combat aerial vehicles, as well as F-16s. Ankara also plans to construct power and natural gas lines from Türkiye to the TRNC, in addition to the existing freshwater line.

Another step taken after the paradigmatic change was the opening of the coastal area of Maraş (Varosha) to people (on October 8, 2020), which had remained closed since the 1984 UN Security Council resolution. Türkiye had previously kept Maraş closed as a goodwill gesture and declared it a military zone. Maraş was among the areas likely to be returned to the GCA in case of a solution. With this initiative, therefore, Türkiye sought to empower its position in the negotiations and force the GCA to take a step forwards toward a resolution (Greek Cypriots would apply to the Immovable Property Commission in the TRNC to take back their properties after Maraş was opened to public and live under the TRNC administration despite the objection by the GCA).

In 28 April 2021, during the international conference convened under the auspices of the UN with the participation of guarantor states, TRNC President Tatar submitted a six-article proposal in line with the new paradigm. These include international recognition of the two states with sovereign equality—that is, recognition of their independence and cooperation between the two states on this basis (Altuğ, Öz, & Arslan, 2021). This package of proposals aimed to achieve results-oriented negotiations with a clear deadline, prioritizing thorny issues such as security, property and border arrangements as well as the future relations of both states with each other and the EU. The proposals represented a break from Türkiye's traditional Cyprus policy over the past two decades since they demanded the independence of the TRNC. In other words, this proposal package aimed to resolve the Cyprus issue on neither a federal nor confederal basis and instead introduced a two-state solution. Additionally, in July 2022, Türkiye offered to cooperate with the GCA on the issues of power, hydrocarbons, water, and renewable energy—on the basis of a two-state solution (NTV, 2022).

Various steps were taken by the international community in response to Türkiye's attempt to ensure the recognition of the TRNC. Pakistan, for example, indirectly supported the independence of the TRNC. In Istanbul, on July 22, 2022, the chairman of the Pakistan parliament, Pervaiz Ashraf, stated in a joint declaration, which also included Azerbaijan that Pakistan would “continue to support Türkiye's perspective regarding Cyprus” (Daily Sabah, 2022). At the 77th General Assembly in September, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called on the international community to recognize the independence of the TRNC. In November, the TRNC joined the Organization of Turkic States as an observer. This initiative was criticized by the EU. Brussels stressed that in line with the UN Security Council resolutions, only the GCA was the official representative of Cyprus and that there was no alternative to that of a solution based on a federation for the island (European Union External Action, 2022). The US joined the EU, opposing the Organization of Turkic Nations' step to grant observer status to the TRNC.

3. The Causes of Türkiye's Shifting Policy Toward the Cyprus Dispute

As Türkiye adopted an assertive course in foreign policy after 2016, it became less willing to settle the Cyprus problem through a federal model. There were no strong incentives, either, for a

negotiated resolution of the issue. Under these conditions, it became reluctant to make further concessions at the negotiating table. That is why a two-state solution became more appealing to Türkiye as a new paradigm.

The accession of the GCA alone to the EU representing the entire island did not help resolve the Cyprus problem in a federal model despite Turkish Cypriots' affirmative vote to the Annan Plan in 2004. This development increased the bargaining power of the GCA over Türkiye, effectively granting the GCA a veto over Türkiye's accession. The balance of power was disrupted in favor of the GCA, and the propensity of the Greek Cypriots to make concessions in the reunification negotiations decreased. As succinctly put by former British Minister of Foreign Affairs, "the reality is that no Greek Cypriot leader will ever be able to get their electorate behind a deal" because "the status quo for the South is simply too comfortable" (Straw, 2017).

The lack of a common Cypriot identity has been a significant problem, undermining efforts to reunify the island as a federal state. As the Greek and Turkish Cypriots have different ethnicities, languages, and religions, there has been a low degree of interaction among the communities. The Ottoman state's *millet* (nation, sectarian) system long fostered the separate development of the different religious communities on the island with their own autonomous institutional structures. Education, too, played a dividing role in that it was conducted in each community's own language, with books brought from the motherlands depicting negative stereotypes of the others. Finally, as the Turkish and Greek communities have identified themselves with the motherlands, they have adopted the latter's adversarial relations with each other.

Since the Turkish operation and formal separation of Cyprus in 1974, the identity gap between the communities has widened further because of the lack of interaction, in particular among the youth (Yılmaz, 2005: 31-33). Time has worked against a federal resolution in the island. Public opinion polls confirm this reality. A poll conducted between January 20 and February 3, 2018, had only 34 percent of Turkish Cypriots viewing themselves as "Cypriot," while 56 percent described themselves as "Turkish Cypriot." Similarly, almost two-thirds of Turkish Cypriots regarded the northern part of the island as their homeland (i.e., rather than the entire island) (Sonan, Küçükşener, & Porat, 2020: 11). This means that a sizeable number of the Turkish Cypriots simply do not identify with Cyprus as a whole, a state of affairs that mitigates against either community or political elite attempts finding a federal solution (Sonan et.al., 2020: 10).

The identity issue was sharpened by the settlement of Turkish citizens on the island *en masse* after Türkiye's military intervention. The same public opinion survey found that 53 percent of the Turkish settlers identified themselves primarily as Turkish, double that of the number who felt Turkish Cypriot (Sonan et.al., 2020: 10). The same survey noted that while the bulk of the Turkish settlers (60 percent) identified themselves with mainland Türkiye, an overwhelming majority of them (94 percent) did not see the entire island as their homeland (Sonan et.al., 2020: 11). Arguably, these findings primarily resulted from the fact that there has been no possibility of socialization between the Turkish settlers and the Greek Cypriot community because of the division of the island.

Meanwhile, among the Turkish Cypriots, there has been some decrease in the proportion of people supporting a federal solution. Nearly two-thirds of Turkish Cypriots supported a federal solution on the basis of the Annan Plan in 2004. The same public opinion survey in 2018 showed this to have dropped to just over two-fifths (Sonan et.al., 2020: 32). Notably, almost the same proportion (40 percent) were supportive of a two-state solution (Sonan et.al., 2020: 31). This change of attitudes may be due to the fact Turkish Cypriots significantly lost their motivation to reunify with the South because of the failure of negotiations since the Annan Plan.

A federal settlement is not popular among the Greek Cypriots, either. As expressed by an observer, the GCA "seems content with the legal, political, and economic supremacy of its republic and is

not willing to relinquish this status for true power-sharing with a smaller community” (Aygın, 2020). Greek Cypriots believe that in a federal state, political equality between the Turkish and Greek Cypriots would compromise the effective functioning of the administration. As stated by GCA President Anastasiadis, “seeking for an effective participation in each institution, misuse of this right by the minority might imperil the right of the majority;” this, he added was “valid in the council of ministers as well as in the other federal institutions” (Güler, 2020). Such views are reflected in Greek public opinion. According to another public opinion survey, an overwhelming majority (over 70 percent) of Greek Cypriots favor a unitary state as an optimal settlement of the problem Christos (Panayiotides, 2020). This indicates a similar rejectionist stance to the reunification of the island as a federal structure to that held at the time of the 2004 Annan Plan, when it was opposed by three-quarters of the Greek population.

Another development complicating a federal settlement of the Cyprus issue is the construction boom in the North, which began after the 2004 rejection of the Annan Plan by the Greek side. Before the Turkish military intervention in 1974, the Greek Cypriots had owned 80 percent of all private properties in the North. The increased construction activities in the North now make it difficult to return the reduced amount of empty land to the Greek Cypriots, further complicating any federal solution (Aygın, 2020).

4. Türkiye's Assertive Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean Dispute

Since the first (1967) gas find in the Abu Madi gas field in Egypt, the volume of gas found in the Eastern Mediterranean region has exceeded 5,000 billion cubic meters (Karbuç, 2019). Some of the discoveries in the region – the Tamar and Leviathan gas fields in Israel (2009 and 2010), Aphrodite in the GCA (2011) and Zohr in Egypt (2015) – represent the world's biggest deep-water gas discoveries, and further large volumes of as yet undiscovered gas and oil reserves have been estimated there. In fact, the region's undiscovered gas reserves are thought to be twice large as those discovered so far (Karbuç, 2021: 117). As a result, the Eastern Mediterranean has become a focal point for large international gas and oil firms seeking to exploit an energy bonanza.

The lack of sufficient export infrastructure, together with various maritime boundary disputes, problems stemming from international law and regional geopolitical competition have all exacerbated the commercialization difficulties associated with the Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon reserves, including the export of gas. The competitiveness of the region's gas, both within and beyond the region, constitutes a major difficulty that needs to be tackled; absorbing externally supplied gas that is uncompetitively priced is highly challenging, especially for the Egyptian market. Low global LNG prices further complicate the situation. Some countries, particularly Jordan, are investing heavily in non-renewable energy resources, lowering the demand for fossil fuels. As noted by Karbuç,

“So far, Egypt and Israel have benefited most from the region's potential. Currently, their markets, as well as their common export outlet, Jordan's market, are oversupplied with gas. Without access to distant and lucrative markets, the commercialization of the existing and future discoveries in the region will be difficult” (Karbuç, 2021: 132).

In sum, new export outlets need to be found in order to address the twin problems of oversupply and uncompetitiveness.

As for Türkiye's stance towards the energy dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean region, the coup plot against the AKP Government on July 15, 2016, as well as the lack of solidarity by the EU and the US against it, triggered a siege mentality in which Ankara saw itself as encircled by external enemies as well as infested by internal ones. Since then, Türkiye has taken a more hardline approach to foreign affairs, including the natural gas dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Türkiye has been at loggerheads with the European Union over the Eastern Mediterranean since the Union sided with its members Greece and the GCA on the issue.² For its part, Türkiye took a largely defiant line towards Brussels, making use of divisions within the EU over policies to be adopted regarding Türkiye and its dependency on Ankara regarding the inflow of refugees. As a result, light sanctions imposed by Brussels were not enough to induce Türkiye to change the hard-line position on the Eastern Mediterranean problem it had adopted. However, with the election in the US of Joe Biden, who indicated that he would take a firm stance towards Ankara, unlike his predecessor, Türkiye began to adopt a more conciliatory line. Most recently, however, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has showcased Türkiye's importance as a mediator and bolstered its bargaining power with the West generally, including with regard to the Eastern Mediterranean problem.

France emerged as the strongest opponent of Türkiye in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis within the EU. Both France and Türkiye vied for regional leadership resulting in an adversarial relationship.³ Türkiye became highly critical of France, which explicitly supported Greece and the GCA in the crisis, including the provision of arms to Athens for strategic deployment against Ankara. Türkiye saw France as an outsider, an extra-regional state with no right to a say in the complex issues of the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, Türkiye did not have a multi-dimensional relationship with France like that which it had with Germany, and France's fierce secular-state opposition to political Islam clashed with the aims and philosophy of the AKP Government under President Erdoğan in Ankara. All of these factors combined to exacerbate the mutual attitude of hostility between Paris and Ankara regarding the Eastern Mediterranean crisis.

Türkiye was not on the same page as the US either when it came to the Eastern Mediterranean issue. The negative legacy of deteriorating Turkish-American relations over the past decade played a significant role in the divergent stances of these states on the Eastern Mediterranean crisis.⁴ Washington provided firm support to Athens as well as to Nicosia in the crisis. The US not only developed defence ties with Greece and supplied it with arms but also suspended a 33-year embargo when removing its restrictions on the supply of non-lethal defence materials and services to the GCA for a year.

Russia adopted a neutral stance in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis as it had energy and defence-related agreements with many countries in the region, but Moscow's wide network of relationships there offset Türkiye's multi-dimensional ties with Russia. As a consequence, Türkiye was not able to use Russia as a balancing actor against the West and its other regional opponents in the crisis (Bardakçı, 2022: 530).

When it comes to Israel, it was in the opposite camp to Türkiye on the Eastern Mediterranean issue. However, Türkiye's softening stance towards the end of 2000 and questions regarding the feasibility of laying a planned 1,900-kilometer underwater natural gas pipeline to send gas from Israel to Europe raised the importance of Türkiye as an alternative overland route (Temizer, 2021). These developments contributed to a thawing of relations between Tel Aviv and Ankara, which had deteriorated in recent years because of disagreements over the Palestinian issue, and they started to talk to each other about the Eastern Mediterranean.

Türkiye's activities in the Eastern Mediterranean emanate from its desire to safeguard its sovereignty more than from economic interests. Türkiye objects to Greek Cypriots' hydrocarbon exploration activities before the Cyprus problem has been settled. That is, Türkiye proposes that

² For Türkiye's policies towards the EU in the Eastern Mediterranean, see, for instance: (Bardakçı, 2022).

³ For Turkish-French rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean, see, for example: (Jabbour, 2021).

⁴ For Turkish-American relations in the context of the Eastern Mediterranean issue, see, for example: (Özdemir, 2020).

the energy dispute should be resolved as part of the resolution of the Cyprus issue as a whole (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2017). The GCA claims a legal right to benefit from natural gas and oil reserves off the island as the sole legitimate representative of Cyprus in international forums (Köprülü, 2020). According to Türkiye, however, the Greek Cypriot exploration activities are tantamount to violating the rights in the Eastern Mediterranean of the Turkish Cypriots, who have the same basic rights to the exploitation of natural resources in and around the island. According to Türkiye, its rights around Cyprus are *ab initio* and *ipso facto*; they are inherent, and their proclamation is unnecessary.

The clash of interests lies in the fact that five of the thirteen offshore concession areas (Blocks 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7) in the Greek Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claimed by the GCA overlap with the EEZ claimed by Türkiye (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2017). Furthermore, seven of the concession areas (Blocks 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 12, 13) claimed by the GCA clash with those of the TRNC. The crux of the problem lies in the fact that Türkiye is not a party to the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), unlike the GCA and Greece. Thus, the legal dispute is quite intractable. Türkiye asserts that as the Mediterranean is a semi-closed sea, any delimitation of the continental shelf should be undertaken by agreement rather than through the UNCLOS (Erciyes, 2022). Accordingly, it views the Greek Cypriots' granting of licenses to foreign energy companies as an infringement of its sovereignty. Rather than Greek Cypriots' licensing of foreign energy firms, Türkiye has been seeking to explore the hydrocarbon reserves off the island jointly; otherwise, Ankara suggests, all exploration activities should be suspended until an agreement is reached (Gafarlı, 2019: 7).

Initially, the AKP Government paid relatively little attention to the energy bonanza struggle in the Eastern Mediterranean. As stated by an observer, "it was busy developing close ties with regional countries, and in order to entrench its problem-solving image, its reaction was relatively mild"; thus, "Ankara's only delimitation agreement was signed with the TRNC in 2011, and Türkiye sent a letter that delineated its continental shelf in the Eastern Mediterranean as late as March 18, 2019" (Uzgel, 2020: 11).

The sense of encirclement following the 2016 coup attempt and what was now once again a growing regional power rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean induced Türkiye to adopt the Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine, which grants it a larger share of the waters of the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea than those drawn on the unofficial "Seville" map published in 2004, which is understood as confining Türkiye to a limited maritime boundary prior to its EU accession (at that time envisaged as a future likelihood). In this situation—and at odds, of course, with Brussels and also Washington on various international issues—Ankara resorted to hard power to defend its foreign policy interests in the region. In accordance with this doctrine, Türkiye undertook its largest-ever naval drill dubbed "Blue Homeland 2019" in February of that year with 103 military vessels (Defence Türkiye, 2019).

In September 2011, some seven years after the announcement of the GCA EEZ in 2004, Türkiye had signed a deal with the TRNC delineating the continental shelf. Thereafter, the TRNC granted licenses to the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) to explore energy around the island.

Meanwhile, Turkish naval forces started to escort Türkiye's exploration and drillships, engaging in an increasingly assertive gunboat diplomacy. In February 2018, Türkiye sent warships to prevent Italian energy firm ENI from drilling off the Cypriot coast, and on October 30, 2018, it dispatched a deep-water drillship (the *Fatih*) to the Eastern Mediterranean, escorted by Turkish military vessels. In November 2018, Türkiye closed the area surrounding Meis island for naval exercises, a move seen by Athens as an attempt to ignore Greek sovereignty over the island. Amid the rising tension, Erdoğan said that Türkiye was determined to teach a lesson to those who sought to restrict it in the Aegean (Karabat, 2019). In May 2019, responding to the drilling activities of

foreign energy companies, Türkiye sent its first drilling vessel, the *Fatih*, to explore natural gas on the Turkish continental shelf close to the GCA (next to Blocks 6 and 1); in June it dispatched a second vessel, the *Yavuz*, for drilling activities, to Cyprus' Karpaz peninsula.

Greece and the GCA concluded security and defense agreements with regional players, including Jordan, the UAE, Egypt, and Israel. Eastern Mediterranean countries formed further partnerships and established the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in January 2020. Involving Italy, Greece, Egypt, Cyprus, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Jordan as members and the US and EU as supporters, the creation of the EMGF galvanized Türkiye into taking an assertive stance in the region. After 2018, energy rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean became militarized, with defense cooperation among the regional countries increasing. Türkiye viewed the EMGF as an opposing military and political alliance more than an energy forum. In response, it partnered with Libya and Qatar. On November 27, 2019, Ankara inked an MoU with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya to challenge the Greek, GCA, and Egyptian claims to some parts of their EEZs in the Eastern Mediterranean—which, in turn, paved the way for increased security cooperation among Türkiye's opponents.

The agreement clearly signalled to other coastal states in the Eastern Mediterranean region that they needed Türkiye's approval for the projects there. Referring to the Libya-Türkiye deal, Erdoğan stated that "Other international actors cannot conduct exploration activities in the areas marked in the [Turkish-Libyan] memorandum. Greek Cypriots, Egypt, Greece and Israel cannot establish a natural gas transmission line without Turkey's consent." (TRT WORLD, 2019). Similar views were echoed by a Turkish foreign policy expert: "Turkey scored a historic victory with the Libya deal, penetrating through the so-called EEZ line, which was seriously violating the rights of the TRNC and the 533 nautical mile-long Anatolian coast in the Eastern Mediterranean to the west." (Casin, 2019).

Another controversial issue is the EastMed pipeline project, planned to bypass Turkish maritime boundaries in shipping Eastern Mediterranean natural gas to the European market. Türkiye seeks to promote the passage of natural gas through its territory, which is a more viable and less costly option.

In reaction to Ankara's bold moves in the region, the "anti-Türkiye" group of countries stood by the GCA and Greece against Türkiye. The EU imposed light sanctions on Türkiye for its drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, and, signing a strategic partnership with Greece in September 2021, France became the most vocal EU country to support Greece and the GCA against Türkiye. It dispatched two frigates as well as a helicopter carrier to the region, sold six Rafale fighter jets to Greece, and undertook joint military exercises with Greece, the GCA, and the US (20 Minutes, 2022). The US, for its part, lifted the arms embargo against the GCA imposed in 1987, enabling it to purchase weapons from Washington (Aswestopoulos, 2022). These developments led to a further spiraling in the militarization of the Eastern Mediterranean issue.

Given the priority to deal with its economic crisis, Türkiye has recently sought to mend fences in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Türkiye's attitude has somewhat softened, as signaled by the withdrawal of the *Oruç Reis* seismic survey on September 12, 2020. In January 2021, Türkiye started exploratory talks with Greece—the first since 2016. However, tensions recently escalated once more due to the two neighbors' violation of each other's airspaces.

5. Explaining Türkiye's Changing Foreign Policy Posture Toward the Eastern Mediterranean Dispute

As for Türkiye's assertive posture in the Eastern Mediterranean and the recent flexing of its military muscle to safeguard its maritime rights and energy interests, numerous factors have played a part in the foreign policy shift. Since the aborted coup attempt in July 2016, the AKP Government

has been allied with the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) and “Eurasianist” actors. This coalition was instrumental in militarizing Turkish foreign policy. Thus, Türkiye has simultaneously carried out three military operations in three countries, Syria, Libya, and Azerbaijan, and maintains troops in 13 countries from Somalia to Qatar. The doctrinal backbone of Türkiye’s assertive policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Blue Homeland doctrine⁵—drafted by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz and Admiral Cihat Yaycı—was viewed as a response to the West as well as regional countries. The US and EU were seen as aiming to force a new “Sèvres Treaty” on Türkiye (i.e., like that attempted after WWI, which led to war and eventually the establishment of the Republic). One of the most important reasons for this attitude was the suspicion that the West had backed the coup attempt in July 2016.

Moreover, this has been played out against a general recognition among the Turkish political elite that the West is in decline, particularly following the 2008 financial/economic crisis. With this decline of the West and concomitant rise of China—and Russia (before the Ukraine war), as well as other, non-aligned powers—the world has become more multi-polar. Also, despite some continued problems related to the disagreement over the extradition of Fetullah Gülen (the religious cleric allegedly behind the coup attempt in July 2016), the imprisonment of the Halk Bank deputy general manager (for violating the US embargo on Iran), the S-400 deal with Russia, and disagreement over Syrian policy, as well as the Brunson issue, Türkiye enjoyed a free hand in foreign policy during the Trump era. When President Trump partially disengaged the US from its international role, the resulting power vacuum was filled with other actors, including Türkiye. Notably in this regard, President Trump neglected transatlantic relations; he “attacked the pillars of European security and prosperity by defining NATO as ‘obsolete’ and the European Union as a ‘foe,’” which led to “a fractured West and encouraged emerging countries to challenge the existing world order” (Kirişçi & Toygür, 2019: 8). These factors all encouraged Türkiye to follow a go-it-alone policy in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The political leverage of the EU over Türkiye has weakened considerably with the disagreement on the settlement of the Cyprus issue, which has come on top of a number of other challenges to the Union, including Brexit and the financial/economic crisis in 2008 (which hit many European countries’ economies severely), along with the 2015 inflow of Syrian and other asylum seekers (through which Türkiye gained leverage) and the rise of populist and nationalist parties that clearly opposed further enlargement of the EU and the influx of the refugees. Overall, these developments and Ankara’s politico-cultural distancing of itself from the West have reduced Türkiye-EU relations to little more than a merely transactional form. It does not help that the EU lacks a common foreign policy, as was visible in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis, when some countries, including Greece, the GCA, and France, were in favor of a hardline policy approach towards Türkiye, while others, including Italy, Spain, Malta, and Bulgaria, advocated a reconciliatory posture.

At the same time, an increase in Türkiye’s material capabilities, including economic and military ones, has helped prompt Türkiye to espouse a confrontational line in foreign affairs. Türkiye’s per capita GDP saw a three-fold growth between 2002 and 2019, from \$3,687 to \$9,126 (The World Bank, n.d.). Thus, it was financially able to increase expenditure for the modernization of its armed forces, including the development of a home-grown production that has even been able to export. Indeed, it would not be sufficient to explain Türkiye’s development of hard power abroad, including the Eastern Mediterranean, without reference to its dynamic defense industry. Türkiye has seen a ten-fold increase in the value of its defense and aerospace sales over the last two decades, from \$1 billion in 2002 to \$10 billion in 2021, during which time its arms exports increased exponentially, from \$248 million to \$3.2 billion (Bekdil, 2022). By 2021, the rate of

⁵ For more information about the Blue Homeland doctrine, see, for instance: (Denizeau, 2021).

indigenous arms in Türkiye's armed forces reached 80 percent (Kostidis, 2022). Without a doubt, the development of Türkiye's defense industry has provided strategic autonomy in its military operations abroad.

Further, the expansion and modernization of the Turkish navy enabled the government in Ankara to advance its foreign policy goals in the Eastern Mediterranean. In line with the Blue Homeland doctrine, Türkiye has been modernizing its navy, relying on indigenous technology to increase the number and capacity of military vessels and warships. The backbone of Türkiye's effort to upgrade its navy has been the National Ship Program (MILGEM), which enabled it to manufacture corvettes and frigates with state-of-the-art technology. Due to the modernization projects, Türkiye now has the strongest navy in the Eastern Mediterranean, as noted by a defense expert: "Overall, Türkiye enjoys a combat-capable, highly combat-ready naval deterrent with an ambitious military modernization agenda" (Kasapoğlu, 2020).

As he promised in his election campaign, President Biden replaced Trump's "America first" policy with an "America back" approach after taking office as US president in January 2021. Biden revealed that he was engaged in restoring America's diminished global role under President Trump (Townley, 2022). He also restored Washington's relations with Brussels. Unlike the Trump era, the Biden era initially saw Türkiye's relations with the US become more distant (again). In response, Türkiye has recalibrated its foreign policy, including in the Eastern Mediterranean, where it has taken a conciliatory stance (ending its seismic searches, retreating its drill vessels, and beginning exploratory talks with Athens). In line with the new policy, Türkiye has also sought to repair its relations with the states in the Eastern Mediterranean that were in the opposite camp.⁶

6. Conclusion

After the Palestinian issue, the Cyprus dispute is the longest standing unresolved inter-communal problem in the world. Observers rightly describe the issue as a "diplomats' graveyard" since, in spite of countless talks, seven UN Secretaries-General, numerous proposals and conferences, and a failed referendum, it still remains thus—unresolved.

The fact that endless negotiations have failed to produce a settlement disheartened the TRNC and Türkiye regarding a federal settlement and induced them to opt for alternative plans. Moreover, the entry of the GCA into the EU representing the entire island made it difficult for the GCA to grant concessions at the negotiating table and changed the balance of power at the expense of the Turkish side. Importantly also, Türkiye's independent foreign policy course after 2016 made it less willing to settle the Cyprus imbroglio using a federal model. The absence of a common identity in the island has deeply compounded the concerns on both sides regarding such thorny issues as political equality, power-sharing, property, and security and guarantees. As a result, Türkiye turned to a pre-2002 two-state solution model like that held during the previous, Rauf Denktaş era. Indeed, the paradigmatic change was, in many ways, a reversal or reversion.

The lack of a common identity in the island was disincentivizing for any solution since both Greek and Turkish Cypriots were divided historically in terms of religion, language, and ethnicity. The low level of interaction between the two communities after the division of the island subsequent to the 1974 Turkish military intervention consolidated the distinct identities of the two parts. Immigration from mainland Türkiye to northern Cyprus and the identification of these immigrants primarily with Türkiye added another layer of complexity to the identity problem.

With respect to Türkiye's confrontational stance in the Eastern Mediterranean, a series of developments have affected its shifting policy in recent years. The alliance of the AKP Government with the nationalist MHP and the Eurasianists following the July 2016 coup attempt

⁶ For more information on Turkey's new policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, see, for instance: (Bardakçı, 2021).

contributed to the militarization of Turkish foreign policy in the context of the Blue Homeland doctrine, which aimed at safeguarding Türkiye's maritime rights. Furthermore, the power vacuum left by the partial withdrawal of the US from global politics, the perception on the part of Türkiye that the West had entered terminal decline following the 2008 financial and economic crisis, the weakening of the EU's political leverage over Türkiye, and its lack of a common security and foreign policy, coupled with the increase in Türkiye's material capacities over the last two decades were instrumental in the country's independent posture in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In short, Türkiye's changing policy towards the Cyprus issue and the Eastern Mediterranean can be explained within a neo-realist framework. The changing domestic conditions and international environment have induced it to embrace a "self-help" posture in foreign policy. Türkiye has entered into alliances and competed with other European and regional states to maximize its national interests. The increase in Türkiye's economic and military power has prompted it to resort to hard power in the Eastern Mediterranean. With the partial US retreat from global politics, the anarchic character of the Eastern Mediterranean became more conspicuous.

Some other studies have reached similar conclusions to those expressed here. For instance, Christofis and Logotheti (2021) concluded that Türkiye has moved from its pro-European policy to a more securitised, nationalist stance, with apparent repercussions for the Cyprus problem. They argue that security concerns in the Eastern Mediterranean, among others, have shaped the AKP Government's foreign policy approach. In contrast, Çelenk (2007) demonstrated how different the AKP's approach to the Cyprus issue was during its initial years in office. These were the so-called "golden years" of Europeanisation in Türkiye that also led the AKP Government to take a constructive attitude to the settlement of the Cyprus issue.

Regarding the limitations of this study, it should be noted that the subjects examined are relatively new. In the consequent paucity of relevant academic works, therefore, the author mostly had to utilise newspaper reports and analyses and think-tank reports.

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