Political Tensions Rise Over Rights To Mediterranean Natural Gas Bonanza

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While the eyes of the world have been on the impeachment of President Trump, Brexit, the coronavirus and the new American peace plan for Israel and the Palestinians, the seeds for the next war perhaps are being sown in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In January, Cyprus claimed that Turkey sent exploration ships to drill for natural gas in Cypriot territorial waters, directly in areas where the mineral drilling rights already have been leased by Cyprus to the Italian company Eni and the French company Total. Cyprus blasted Turkey as a "pirate state" that flouts international law. Later that week, Cyprus backtracked on the claim, but tensions in the region remain high.

The genesis of this issue goes back to the Turkish invasion of northern Cyprus in 1974, and to the ascension of power in Turkey of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2003.

The island of Cyprus is divided mostly into people of Turkish descent in the northeast and Greek descent in the southwest. Effectively a part of the British Empire starting in 1914, Cyprus gained its independence from Great Britain in 1960, after having endured a long anti-British campaign by the Greek Cypriot National Organization of Cypriot Fighters, a guerrilla group that desired political union with Greece. However, in 1974, Greece was ruled by the military, which ordered the Cypriot National Guard to depose the ruler of Cyprus, Archbishop Makarios III, and install a pro-Greek government. In response, Turkey invaded the island, eventually capturing approximately 37% of the territory, and declared the independent state of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Meanwhile, the island as a whole, called the Republic of Cyprus, remains politically independent, with the Turkish controlled northeast having only de facto existence. Turkey is the only country that currently recognizes Northern Cyprus, and Turkey considers itself to be the protector of Turkish-Cypriot rights. The issue has festered for decades, but so far armed conflict generally has been avoided.

Since 2003, Turkey has been ruled by Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Islamic fundamentalist AKP Party. Bucking Turkish tradition that dates back to the end of World War I, Erdogan reintroduced religion into Turkish politics, and reprioritized Turkish international interests. So thoroughly has Erdogan revised Turkey's foreign policy that in 2020 Israel, which for decades was a close ally of Turkey, placed Turkey on a list prepared by its military as a potential external threat to the Jewish State.

At the end of 2019, Erdogan signed a bizarre agreement with one of the factions competing for power in Libya. In this agreement, Turkey and Libya carved up a portion of the Eastern Mediterranean as their exclusive economic zone. At the same time, Erdogan sent Turkish troops to Libya, in effect making himself the strongman of that strife-ridden nation. Taking that one step further, he sent Turkish ships to Cypriot waters and announced that he was starting gas drilling both as champion of Turkish/Cypriot rights and also in fulfillment of his rights under the Turkish-Libyan economic agreement. This puts him in direct opposition to three nations with whom he has a history of difficulty – Cyprus, Israel, and Greece, all of whom recently signed a deal to build a gas pipeline from the Israeli Leviathan Gas Field, right near the Cypriot gas fields, first to Greece and then to Italy and the heart of Europe.

The European Union chided Erdogan for Turkish actions, saying Erdogan's plans are "illegal," but has done little more to address the issue. In response, Erdogan announced that now it is "no longer legally possible" for any investigation into natural gas potential in the Eastern Mediterranean or pipeline development to occur in that region without Turkish or Libyan approval.

The world now wonders how far Erdogan will go. He successfully threatened the United States out of Syria and established himself as a key power broker there. Recent meetings with United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo suggest that the United States also may accept Erdogan's role as a pivotal player in Libya. On Wednesday, February 5 however, American Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Francis Fannon drew the line. Fannon said that the United States supports Cypriot rights to develop its natural gas resources and that the proceeds from that exploration should be divided between Greek and Turkish Cypriots as part of a deal to reunify the nation.

Once again, the ball is in Erdogan's court. Will he try to disrupt Israeli and Greek natural gas interests the way he is disrupting Cypriot interests? Should that happen, the possibility of a shooting war cannot be discounted.

Erdogan has other issues to consider. Although the Turkish economy has proved resilient, Turkey is not in great economic shape. In addition, Turkey now is stretched militarily. Turkey's involvement in Syria, which is right on Turkey's borders, would be much easier to explain internally than Turkey's involvement in Libya – especially if Turkish soldiers begin to die. Should things in the Eastern Mediterranean really get out of hand, it is an open question if the Turkish population will accept a real war with Greece, Israel, or a combination of those countries (and maybe others)?

The fact that Turkey remains a member of NATO, along with the United States and much of Western Europe – including Greece – only complicates the matter further. What would happen if armed conflict broke out pitting one NATO against another? Would other NATO members be free to choose sides and enter the fray militarily against those whom they have sworn by treaty to protect? How would this affect NATO's cohesiveness and ability to defend member countries from aggression by Russia? After all, that remains NATO's primary mandate.

Meanwhile, Greece and Cyprus, but not Turkey, are members of the European Union. Accession negotiations between the European Union and Turkey have effectively stalled since 2016, with the former accusing the latter of various human rights violations and other deficits in the rule of law. Therefore, is it realistic to expect the European Union, as a non-military economic and political body only, to have sufficient influence over a non-member country like Turkey that could avert a shooting war if tempers flare and other means of leveraging or appeasing Turkey are not found?

It will be important in 2020 to keep a careful watch on all of this. While the world focuses on other flashpoints, the Eastern Mediterranean could well prove to be a place where instability turns into true military conflict. Rather than ignoring the obvious by wishing for the best, it would be better to start planning for how to stop any such conflict now, before it actually begins.

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

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