

# GREECE, US, TURKEY

## Eastern Med Conundrum

### Q&A

**Tassos Symeonides**  
(RIEAS Academic Advisor)

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*Turkish belligerence in the East Med is going through yet another spasm of loud sabre rattling and threats of military action. Are we on the throes of an aggressive war in the Aegean aiming at grabbing Greek territory and forcing a “solution” of what Ankara perceives as a “violation of Turkish inalienable rights?” How should Greece react?*

History tells us that when a habitual aggressor, like Turkey, goes into yet another round of ranting and raving about “inalienable rights” it is either confident it can win or almost certain it is losing. Hitler in the 1930s correctly estimated the cowardice of Britain and France that allowed him to achieve spectacular territorial advantages without firing a single shot. In contrast, president-for-life Erdogan of the 2000s finds himself surrounded by intractable crises, most of his own making, and with minimal space for effective maneuver.

Greece is not at its best but, for the first time, it is a party to a coalition of states opposed to Turkish expansionism. The East Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), bringing together Greece, Israel, and the Republic of Cyprus, is at an advanced stage of development--and has won open US endorsement after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [attended](#) the latest EMP summit meeting in Jerusalem on March 20, 2019. Egypt is also reaching a common understanding with the EMP states, as its

geopolitical and energy interests coincide with those of the EMP partners.

Meantime, Erdogan's Islamic hegemonism, grandiose neo-Ottoman dreams, and his [ruining of the Turkish economy](#) has pushed Turkey to a geostrategic corner. The Turkish strongman carries his current desperate flirting with Russia, Iran, and China from a position of noticeable strategic weakness. Any pragmatist can see that, despite Erdogan's delusional ranting and raving, Turkey can ill afford to disassociate itself from Europe and the US. Reverting to a state of "Moslem orthodoxy" will isolate Turkey from the civilized world and irreversibly damage its hopes for the future. Erdogan and his Moslem fundamentalists though refuse to accept reality.

***The purchase of the Soviet S-400 missile system by Turkey has led to an unprecedented American backlash. US Congress reaction has been severe, creating the impression that, at long last, Turkey was about to collect its dues for its persistent aggression and expansionism. Yet, despite the US outcry, President Trump is planning to visit Turkey soon. What is going on?***

Pro-Turkism has deep roots in most Western countries because of distant and most recent history. Pro-Turkish lobbies in Washington and other Western capitals have suffered defeats in recent times, but they remain active and well-funded. NATO's ambivalent and often contradictory policies in avoiding to chastise Turkey as it should continue to fuel Turkey's belief it is an irreplaceable asset to the West.

President Trump's unique, and often baffling, decision-making style makes US policies toward Turkey even more complicated and unpredictable. Ankara discovered, for example, it was dealing with an unusual, to say the least, interlocutor in the White House when it was forced [to beat a hasty retreat](#) in the case of an American pastor imprisoned in Turkey on outlandish charges of terrorism.

Turkey's meddling in Syria has also collided with US opposition which Ankara has been unable to counter. Ankara's recent S-400 ploy has resulted in US pressures on the Turkish regime to deliver an alternative "arrangement" regarding this aspect of its Putinesque love affair that will satisfy both the US Congress and the NATO alliance.

Therefore, Trump's still unannounced plan to visit Turkey should be seen as a continuation of American pressures on Turkey to tone down its bluster if it wants "normal" relations with the US and, by extension, with the Western alliance.

The visit should not be conceived as somehow legitimizing Erdogan's demands upon Turkey's neighbors or approval of Turkish expansionist plans, especially in Syria, simply because vital US strategic interests are at stake and the mood in Washington regarding Turkey is the worst ever.

Trump's relationship with the Turkish strongman is hardly harmonious. During Erdogan's visit to Washington in May 2017 his bodyguards attacked peaceful American protesters sending many to hospital. The US indicted the attackers but later dropped the charges. Still, the brawl badly damaged relations between the two countries. Tensions further increased when in January 2019 Trump [vowed to "devastate Turkey economically"](#) if Turkish forces attacked US-allied Kurdish fighters in Syria. Thus, right now, it should be obvious US-Turkey relations are ["worse off than you think ... and easy fixes won't cut it."](#) A Trump visit to Turkey at this time should be seen as an effort to reiterate vital US strategic interests are at stake and the mood in Washington regarding Turkey is the worst ever.

***Could this visit, if it is realized, affect the growing US plans to increase American military presence in Greece?***

The state of affairs in the Eastern Med and, particularly, in Syria, leaves little room for any sudden changes in the developing the evolving US-Greek strategic dialogue. Turkey's action in Syria, and Ankara siding with anti-Assad Islamist terrorists, was the straw that broke the (Turkish) camel's back in American eyes. Erdogan's wretched hostility toward Israel added a grinding stone to the weight of that straw: in March 2018 a Turkish paper closely identified with the Turkish president-for-life declared that Turkey desired to lead an "Army of Islam," drawn from the 57 member countries of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, [to destroy Israel militarily in 10 days](#) and liberate "Palestine." This news did not please Washington.

Against this background, the Pentagon is increasing its strategic and operational options in the Eastern Mediterranean by shifting its focus to Greece. [In the words of Gen. Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff \(JCS\)](#): "If you

look at geography, and you look at current operations in Syria, you look at potential other operations in the eastern Mediterranean, the geography of Greece and the opportunities here are pretty significant.”

American interest focuses on the Larissa air force base as a potential home for KC-135 tankers in addition to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) already operating out of this central Greece facility. Expanding US air surveillance out of Larissa, by bringing into service the latest UAV models available, can put US assets over Syria, the Black Sea, and Northern Africa on permanent routine rotation.

Another sector for cooperation is the expansion of US naval presence via basing rights in northern Greek ports in addition to the Souda Bay US Naval Station in Crete. Northern Greece deployments would put the US Navy within earshot of the exit of the Dardanelles, only egress for the Russian navy into the “warm waters” of the Mediterranean.

These purely military moves acquire a high degree of potential permanence as Washington shifts its weight in favor of the EMP which, for better or for worse, is a thinly-veiled alliance against Turkish expansionism and aggression. And to add further to Turkish discomfort, US energy giants like Exxon Mobile are present in Cypriot waters to expand drilling, and eventually begin pumping, brushing aside Turkish verbal threats of naval action to prevent their activities.

***How can Greece leverage all this positive news to build decisive deterrence vis-à-vis Erdogan’s burgeoning threats?***

First and foremost, Greece must accelerate talks on the expansion of US military presence and offer Washington all possible accommodation in support of US forces. [Initial proposals are already on the table](#) and the next conservative government, following the widely expected defeat of the SYRIZA radical leftists in the upcoming general election, must pursue talks on the matter as its very top priority. Expansion of basing rights should be coupled with negotiating **closer operational cooperation between Greek and US forces**, something that has been rejected by Greek governments in the past for fear of a leftist political backlash. Regular training exercises, and development of a common response to crisis

scenaria centered on a potential Turkish thrust in the Aegean, should constitute the core of this expanded cooperation. The ultimate aim would be building an active deterrence “**allied wall of confidence**” vis-à-vis any Turkish attempt to launch an adventurist war of aggression in the Aegean.

***What would be the role of the Eastern Mediterranean Partnership in any such expanded Greece-US defense cooperation?***

The role of the EMP is critical in providing permanent anchoring to any expanded US military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean via the special US-Israel strategic relationship. The EMP takes this already established special relationship to the next level and that is a critical “power multiplier” affecting both Greece and Cyprus.

The EMP partners are already working on closer defense ties. The Israeli Air Force trains in Greek air space in close cooperation with the Hellenic Air Force. Israeli pilots, flying over Greek territory, conduct combat and air refueling exercises that were difficult to conduct in the past for lack of space. These drills aim to improve Israel’s readiness for long-range missions. The three partners also conduct common special forces and commando training exercises.

***Erdogan, however, has announced Turkey will drill for gas inside the Cypriot EEZ. Isn’t this proof of unusual confidence vis-à-vis what Ankara perceives as “anti-Turkish” international reactions?***

If anything, this latest hostile and provocative antic is proof of the *increasing frustration* of the Turkish Islamist regime because of its inability to control the strategic situation according to its outlandish theories on Turkey’s claimed sea *Lebensraum*. Turkey is in the process of a Hail Mary pass as regional and US opposition to its expansionism solidifies in no uncertain ways. And to add to Erdogan’s troubles, Ankara’s drilling announcement drew an [unusual reaction](#) from EU Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini, who warned Turkey to expect a response “in full solidarity” with Cyprus.

The current Turkish provocation is reminiscent of similar [Turkish threats](#), leveled at ExxonMobil in 2018, which came to nothing thanks to solid opposition to Ankara’s saber rattling that included a quiet increase of US naval presence in the

vicinity. And Ankara should keep in mind what happened when it deployed its warships to stop an Italian research vessel from drilling in Cypriot waters in March 2018. Although the Italians backed down in the face of this blatant threat the US reaction was sharp and unequivocal. Referring to the Italian incident the then US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Wess Mitchell [warned](#) that the US would “not take a friendly view to any kind of harassment in Cyprus waters especially when US ships are involved.” And referring to the EMP, Mitchell added that “Greece, Cyprus and Israel are very important countries for the US because they are stable, democratic, western allies in a region where you don’t find a lot of stable, democratic partners.”

In conclusion, the Turkish president-for-life faces insurmountable odds: the Turkish economy is tanking and Turks who can leave the country do so [“...in droves, draining money and talent.”](#) Despite enormous investment in exploration and drilling technologies Turkish efforts so far have had no success whatsoever. Waters around Turkey are being parceled out faster than Ankara can say “I object” and it is becoming obvious by the day Turkey must negotiate if it really wants a portion of the enormous natural gas bonanza. Turkish energy needs depend exclusively on imports and any military adventurism can deal incalculable damage to the country’s ability to get regular supplies delivered.

Turkish bullying won’t stop of course but it is becoming increasingly evident that Erdogan’s neo-Ottoman dreams have become ticking bombs threatening Turkey’s long-term political stability and strategic security—and the recent resounding defeat of Erdogan’s Islamist party in Turkey’s local elections is an unmistakable harbinger of how Turkish politics may be turning into mass opposition to the neo-sultan’s authoritarianism.

The Turkish Islamist ultranationalists may still believe they have strong cards to play in the Eastern Med melee but the odds of the card game keep growing in the exact opposite direction.