

# THE “GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY” IN EAST MEDITERRANEAN

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Recent developments off Cyprus are causing regional tension and the East Mediterranean countries are flexing their muscles and adopting "gunboat diplomacy" of naval drills as a strategic asset in their conflicts. "Gunboat diplomacy" can be defined in a general way as any aggressive diplomatic activity carried out with the implicit or explicit use of military (usually naval) power. However, the term is most often associated with the activities of the Great Powers in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

There are 4 main reasons for the rising tension in the region:

**The Turkey – Cyprus, "Energy crisis"**- the Greek Republic of Cyprus has divided the area it claims in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) into 13 blocks, in which the rights to drill have provoked high interest due to the potential for huge gas discoveries.

ExxonMobil announced in February 2019, that it has made the world's third-biggest natural gas discovery off the coast of Cyprus. The discovery has been a cause for optimism but it is also a reason for concern.

The discovery could represent a natural gas resource of 142 billion-227 billion cubic meters. ExxonMobil and Qatar Petroleum own the exploration rights in offshore areas south of Cyprus, with the former owning a 60% stake in the block, while Qatar Petroleum holds the rest.

Turkey is claiming that the search for hydrocarbons in the Mediterranean Sea near Cyprus cannot be carried out until an agreement is reached on a Cyprus settlement. Turkey has vowed to prevent Greek Cypriots from exploring for oil or gas around the ethnically-split island and says some areas of Cyprus's offshore maritime zone fall under its jurisdiction. Turkey started independent exploration of gas reserves in the Northern part of the island controlled by the Turkish community.

Ankara's clearly stated objective is to co-administer with the Republic of Cyprus the latter's huge hydrocarbons deposits and to control regional energy routes.

**The unresolved Cyprus conflict** - Cyprus is ethnically partitioned between its Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities. Cyprus has been divided since 1974 when Turkish troops invaded and occupied the northern part of the island.

While Greek-majority Republic of Cyprus is internationally recognized, the breakaway Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is recognized only by Ankara. In 2004, the European Union had declared the Greek Cypriots the sole entity representing the island of Cyprus and accepted it as an EU member.

**Turkish-Greek tension** - the Greek side is convinced that Turkey's aggressive actions in Cyprus' EEZ and in the Aegean aim to establish de facto situations at the expense of the sovereign rights of both Cyprus and Greece. The Greek Foreign Ministry is closely monitoring the situation in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean and the Hellenic Navy has been placed in a constant state of readiness to respond to any challenge from Ankara.<sup>1</sup> There is also Turkish talk of reclaiming some Aegean islets.

Ankara is concerned about a new concentration of powers in the eastern Mediterranean:

### **The tripartite alliance: Egypt – Greece – Cyprus**

In 2014, Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece signed maritime border demarcation agreement between Egypt and Cyprus and between Egypt and Greece.

Egypt is working to promote regional cooperation in this area, because it wants to intensify the exploration and exploitation of natural gas. Egypt, Greece and Cyprus negotiating to build a pipeline to deliver natural gas to Egypt from the Aphrodite Gas Field off the coast of Cyprus to be liquefied using Egypt's liquefaction plants and re-exported.<sup>2</sup>

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said in January 2018, that the maritime border demarcation agreement between Egypt and Cyprus was invalid and the agreement violates Turkey's continental shelf.

In an official statement, Egypt foreign ministry spokesman Ahmed Abu Zeid Egypt warned on February 7, 2018, against any attempts to infringe or disparage its sovereign rights in the eastern Mediterranean's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), following statements by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu .<sup>3</sup>

Relations between Turkey and Egypt have been strained since the 2013 ouster of Egypt's Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, a close ally of Erdogan's AKP government. Erdogan has slammed Morsi's removal as a "coup." Cairo has repeatedly accused Ankara of "interference" in its domestic affairs and of supporting Islamist militants who carry out terrorist attacks in Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

### **The tripartite alliance: Israel – Greece – Cyprus <sup>5</sup>**

Israel maintains extensive cooperation with both Cyprus and Greece, participating in various military exercises of air, sea and land forces with the Mediterranean nations, especially after the degradation of ties with Turkey.

Turkey and Israel had been close allies in the defense industry, security cooperation, intelligence exchange and military training since the 1960's and peaked in the 1990's. The diplomatic standoff after the Gaza ,Mavi Marmara crisis (2010), affected Turkey's relations with Israel. Ankara

suspended all defense projects and military cooperation with Israel, paving the way for a warmer relationship with the Greek and Cypriot governments.

Israel and Cyprus and Greece are close allies and share a number of strategic interests, such as the ambitious project to build a submarine pipeline from Israel to Cyprus and Crete to mainland Greece.

In March 2018, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot was hosted for the first time by his Greek counterpart, while Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman hosted the Greek defense minister in Israel.<sup>6</sup>

In June 2018, the defense ministers of the three countries held the second trilateral meeting to strengthen security and expand cooperation in cyber security, joint military drills, and search and rescue operations in the eastern Mediterranean.

In December 2018, the leaders of the three countries held the fifth trilateral meeting in Israel to continue discussions on a joint gas pipeline to export gas to Europe, regional issues and strengthening cooperation among Mediterranean nations.

### *The "gunboat diplomacy" of naval drills in East Mediterranean*

#### **Turkey – exercise" Blue Homeland "(February - March 2019)**

Turkey has conducted between February 27 and March 8, 2019, the "Blue Homeland 2019" exercise **the largest naval exercise ever held in Turkey.** Blue Homeland "drill, had the participation of 103 military ships and thousands of soldiers. The exercise tested its war capabilities in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and the eastern Mediterranean, simultaneously.<sup>7</sup>

For the sea, air, and land maneuvers, Ankara has issued a NAVTEX tying up areas of the Southeastern Aegean and the Southeastern Mediterranean, including the continental shelf of the Greek island of Kastelorizo, the area southeast of Rhodes, and the EEZ of the Republic of Cyprus.<sup>8</sup>

It has been described by Turkish media as a “war rehearsal” which aims to send a clear message to Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt and whoever else disputes Ankara’s declared interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. <sup>9</sup>

### **The participants in the exercise**

The exercise was coordinated by the Turkish Naval War Center Command established in 2018.

The 103 vessels strong flotilla included 16 frigates, 9 corvettes, 19 fast attack missile craft, 7 submarines, 11 mine hunting vessels, 16 patrol boats, 2 training/escort ships, 2 replenishment ships, 22 Amphibious ships, 3 submarine rescue and support as well as other navy vessels, commando units, land forces and the Turkish Coast Guard.

Airplanes - 7 MPA aircraft, 33 ASW helicopters.

Unmanned aircraft and autonomous unmanned vehicles were used together with the manned systems. The short ranged Bayraktar and the longer range ANKA UAV’s are in service with the Turkish Navy.

To keep so many ships for 10 days at sea requires a good and strong logistical support and the test of the logistical support Turkey can provide to its deployed forces, was one of the important issues of this exercise.

Important part of the exercise was the port visits made by the Turkish warships. During the exercise, 40 ports were visited by participating naval units, 7 of which were foreign ports in Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russian Federation, Georgia and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

The "Gunboat diplomacy" of naval drills and naval visits reflect foreign policy trends. Exercise” Blue Homeland “combined a show of force with diplomacy, visiting 5 ports different countries at the same time.

### **Egypt, Greece, Cyprus conducted joined military exercise "Medusa 8" (April 2019)**

The Egyptian, Greek and Cypriot armed forces conducted from 13 to 19 April 2019, the joint naval and air exercise "Medusa-8 "in Egypt's territorial waters in the Mediterranean.

The drill aimed to boost military cooperation between the three countries "in the framework of the annual plan for joint exercises by the [Egyptian] Armed Forces to promote and support military cooperation with brotherly and friendly countries." <sup>10</sup>

Observers from Bulgaria, France, Germany, United Arab Emirates, Italy, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Bahrain, Portugal, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Sudan and the USA have been invited to the exercise.<sup>11</sup>

The early stages of the drills included activities on planning and managing joint combat and air and maritime reconnaissance activities. The main stage of the Medusa 8 included live fire training by naval units and landing operations by amphibious and airborne forces.<sup>12</sup>

The defense ministers, Egypt's Mohamed Zaki, Greece's Evangelos Apostolakis and Savvas Angelides of Cyprus observed the main part of the joint exercise.

### **Egypt, Greece, Cyprus Joint exercise "Medusa-7" (November 2018)**

Greece, Egypt, and Cyprus conducted a joint military exercise dubbed 'Medusa 7', held on November 24-30, 2018. According to the Hellenic National Defense General Staff (GEETHA), the land, air and sea exercise on and around the island of Crete was observed by military representatives from the US, Italy, Portugal, the United Arab Emirates, and Morocco.

Greek Defense Minister Panos Kammenos and his counterparts from Cyprus and Egypt, Savvas Angelidis and Mohamed Ahmed Zaki, attended the final phase of the exercise. The Ministers of Defense hailed the forces carrying out the training, which they say "reflects a special level of cooperation between the forces of the three countries."

The Greek Armed Forces participated with three frigates with navy helicopters, one submarine, two missile ships, eight F-16 aircraft, one aircraft of the 380 Airborne Early Warning & Control System Squadron, one Super Puma helicopter, three Chinook helicopters, four attack helicopters AH-64, and two Marine and Personnel Special Forces units.

The Cypriot Armed Forces participated with one offshore vessel and personnel of Special Forces units.

The Egyptian Armed Forces participated with one Mistral Class (ENS Anwar El Sadat), one frigate, one submarine, two missile ships, six F-16s, one E2-C aircraft, as well as Special Forces.

The purpose of the exercise was to promote the cooperation of the Armed Forces of the participating countries by improving the level of operational training in a multi-threat environment, according to an announcement by the General Secretariat for Defense.

### **Israel and Cyprus - Joint military exercise (December 2018)**

The Armed Forces of the Republic of Cyprus along with their Israeli counterparts, conducted in December 17 – 19, 2018, a joint exercise as part of the annual military cooperation program between the two countries.<sup>13</sup>

According to a press release issued by the Cypriot Ministry of Defense, the exercises took place within the Nicosia Flight Information Region (FIR) and included a large part of the area of the Republic of Cyprus. During the exercises, personnel belonging to the Cypriot National Guard cooperated with representatives from the Israeli Defense Forces, and several different types of Israeli aircraft were involved. The last military exercise between Cyprus and Israel on Cypriot soil and territorial waters took place two months earlier.<sup>14</sup>

### **Israel – Greece joint exercises (2018) <sup>15</sup>**

In November 2018, the Air Forces of Greece and Israel held a joint twelve-day exercise, based at the 110 Combat Wing of the Larissa Air Base. The Israeli Air Force participated with eleven F-16 fighter jets, one radar plane G550H and staff.

The exercise was part of a defense cooperation program of the two countries aimed at bettering combat capacity and have closer cooperation between the two countries Air Forces in air-to-air and air-to-ground missions in mixed formations.

### **Greece – Cyprus naval exercise (October 2018)**

Large-scale multinational search and rescue exercise ‘Nemesis’ took place in the Cyprus EEZ for the fifth consecutive year, in October 2018. The exercise involved a large number of aircraft and personnel from Cyprus and foreign countries and was coordinated by the Larnaca-based Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) in close cooperation with the rescue coordination centers of participating countries.

### **Summary**

Turkey's objective is to share with the Republic of Cyprus the huge hydrocarbons deposits and to gain the greatest possible benefits. Ankara wants to maintain its presence as a regional power and to control regional energy routes. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is furious that Turkey has been excluded from the energy cooperation between Cyprus, Greece, Egypt and Israel.

The fact that Cyprus’ EEZ attracts huge interest of energy companies due to its significant deposits increases Turkey’s aggressiveness and hostility in demanding a piece of the pie.

The Cyprus government said it was trying to resolve the dispute with Turkey through diplomatic means, without escalating tensions, while Turkey refused to negotiate and sent a second drilling vessel to areas around the divided island of Cyprus.



The “Blue Homeland 2019” exercise occurred during the increase of tensions in the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean. The exercise has been described by Turkish media as a “war rehearsal” which aimed to send a clear message to Greece, Cyprus, Egypt and Israel that Turkey is ready to protect its interests in the region.

The growing standoff between Turkey and Cyprus over exploiting energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean risks to turn the bilateral dispute into a regional conflict. Turkey's "gunboat" policy and the response of Cyprus, Greece, Egypt and Israel, highlighting tensions over offshore resources in the east Mediterranean.

The joint military exercises of Cyprus, Greece, Egypt and Israel are part of a "gunboat policy" and a message to deter the aggressive Turkish policy.

In addition to Cyprus, Greece, Turkey and Egypt, Israel and Lebanon are also at odds over offshore gas exploration and marine boundaries.

The international community should redouble efforts to move toward an East Mediterranean Basin-wide comprehensive agreement marked by cooperation and joint management of transboundary resources.

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