

Turkish-Egyptian Maritime Negotiations: Hype or Substance?

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During the first week of March 2021, the Turkish press highlighted Egypt's ostensible compliance with disputed Turkish maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu quickly welcomed the development, and hinted at negotiations between Cairo and Ankara to establish a maritime boundary, as well as broader rapprochement. These statements represent a strange turn of events, considering the animosity between the two states, and they counter recent trends in the Eastern Mediterranean. Observers of regional geopolitics will need to keep an eye on Egypt, but Turkish reporting probably reveals much more about Turkey's regional isolation than it does about changes in Cairo. It may also signal a new, more subtle strategy by Ankara to spoil cooperation between Israel, Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt rather than simply to confront them with naval might.

Over the past decade, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt have discovered large gas fields adjacent to their shores. Their claims to the fields are based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which acts as customary law even for states like Israel and the United States that have not signed it. UNCLOS provides islands the same rights as continental land masses to territorial waters and an exclusive economic zone (EEZ). When these claims overlap, a median line becomes the boundary. Under UNCLOS, Greek islands limit Turkey's maritime rights significantly. Ankara, therefore, rejects UNCLOS and asserts that islands have no EEZ, and claims waters and gas that international law grants to Greece and Cyprus. Ankara also insists that the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which only it recognizes, has some rights to gas in Cypriot waters.

Against this background, on March 1, 2021, the pro-government Turkish newspaper *Daily Sabah* reported that Egyptian hydrocarbon exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean would not violate Turkey's maritime claims. On March 3, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu lauded Egypt for "respecting Turkey's continental shelf in the Eastern Mediterranean" and thereby acknowledging Ankara's maritime rights. The Turkish press added that Ankara "may negotiate a maritime demarcation agreement with Egypt."

Hints of Egypt recognizing Turkish claims created discomfort in Athens, and in fact, Cairo quickly dispelled doubts about its commitments. Egypt and Greece signed a partial deal demarcating their maritime boundary in August 2020, and following the Turkish press reports, Egyptian sources emphasized that Greece and Cyprus would be part of any Egyptian maritime negotiations with Turkey. The Egyptian press also reported that President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi called Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to reaffirm “the close bilateral relations” and to emphasize his commitment to cooperate in “energy and economics as well as security and the military.” On March 8, Greek and Egyptian Foreign Ministers issued a new map of Egyptian hydrocarbon exploration that disregards Turkey’s claims.

Egypt has too much at stake to break with its partners in the Eastern Mediterranean. When the Egyptian military overthrew Mohamed Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood government, Erdogan became one of the fiercest critics of the new el-Sisi regime. Moreover, Cairo sees Ankara’s support for Islamists as an existential threat. Along those lines, Ankara and Cairo backed opposing sides of the Libyan civil war. Turkey bases some of its maritime claims on an agreement it signed in 2019 with the Islamist Libyan Government of National Accord, which Egypt fiercely opposes.

Egypt has also been a strong proponent of the anti-Turkish alignments in the region. In 2019, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and Italy formed the EastMed Gas Forum, which is headquartered in Egypt; Turkey is conspicuously excluded from the forum. In addition, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt have increased their security cooperation.

Nevertheless, there are at least three reasons one might question Egypt’s commitment to current geopolitical alignments. First, the Arabic press has published reports about attempts at rapprochement between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt on one side, and Ankara on the other. Leaders in these states are worried about their relationship with the Biden administration, and though still suspicious of Turkey, the Arab states may hedge by repairing regional ties.

Second, and in a related context, the anti-Turkish bloc in the Eastern Mediterranean is tied to Western alliances, but recently Cairo has demonstrated an independent streak. Egypt joined Russia in November for their first joint exercise in the Black Sea and it plans to buy Russian SU-35s fighters, despite the threat of United States sanctions. Egypt’s outreach to Russia is probably an attempt to outmaneuver Turkey rather than a turn from the West. Ironically, however, Egypt may face a similar fate as Turkey, whose

purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense systems soured its relationship with Washington.

Third, Egypt's interests do not align perfectly with Athens and Nicosia on all aspects of energy exploitation, and under a deal with Turkey, Egypt would gain rights to waters currently claimed by Cyprus and Greece. Also, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece have planned an undersea pipeline that runs from Cyprus to Italy. More recently, Jerusalem and Cairo have raised the idea of a pipeline that runs south from Israeli gas fields to Egypt and then to Crete. Doing so still excludes Turkey, but it avoids some Greek waters Ankara claims are disputed. It also bypasses Cyprus. In the past, Cyprus expressed interest in shipping its gas to Egypt for conversion to liquified natural gas, but Athens and Nicosia cannot be pleased with a pipeline that implicitly recognizes Turkish maritime claims at their expense. These concerns give some limited credibility to Turkish reports about Cairo's shift in policy.

Though Egypt's policies are unlikely to change, these caveats may still aid Turkish strategy. Until recently, Turkey relied almost exclusively on its navy to enforce its claims. Turkish ships confronted legitimate exploration vessels and protected Turkish vessels operating illegally in Greek and Cypriot waters. However, this strategy further united Israel with Greece and Cyprus and aligned them closely with France, Italy, and Egypt. As interlocking deals integrated these states into a cohesive anti-Turkish bloc, Erdogan was finally forced to address Turkey's isolation in the region.

The formation of a unified anti-Turkey bloc with strong Western backing could leave Ankara out of an emerging economic system and with no military option to oppose it. Thus, Turkey would not reap any benefit from the newly discovered gas in the Eastern Mediterranean. To prevent such an outcome, over the past five months Turkey has moved away from a strategy based purely on confrontation. Instead, it has focused on severing or at least sowing doubts within the anti-Turkish bloc. In October, Ankara floated rapprochement with Cairo, a fledgling strategy that accelerated with President Donald Trump's electoral defeat. Erdogan relied heavily on his close relationship with Trump, who sometimes contradicted his own administration's policies. President Joseph Biden, by contrast, is unlikely to provide significant concessions to Ankara.

Since November, Ankara has increasingly attempted to break the unity of the states that have arrayed against it. After reaching out to Israel over the winter, Turkey seems to be defining Egypt as a potential diplomatic target. Anomosity between Cairo and Ankara remains high and Egypt probably has too much at stake to abandon its Greek-speaking partners for Turkey. Yet considering Egypt's increasingly independent foreign policy, el-Sisi's reassurances will not completely erase the uncertainties about his reliability in

Athens. Gas pipelines are expensive, and they bind states together in ways that are difficult to unravel. The recent Turkish press reports may have undermined some of the trust that is essential for such projects.

Policymakers in Israel and elsewhere should watch for further indications that Cairo's policies are indeed evolving. However, Turkish strategy is more likely to succeed by sowing uncertainty among its adversaries, thus complicating a unified effort to exploit and protect their gas fields. Ankara appears to have recognized that such a strategy can be as effective as that which relies purely on naval force, and it is likely to increasingly pursue this type of asymmetric approach in the future.

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