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ENGAGING TURKEY IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN DURING A TIME OF CRISIS

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For the past decade, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has increasingly taken advantage of internal divisions within and between the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to pursue his own interests. During the current crisis in Ukraine, Turkey's unique geostrategic position allows it to engage with the EU, Ukraine, and Russia. After Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Turkey waited four days before classifying the invasion as "war," stating that it could not give up its relationship with Moscow.¹ This initial reluctance and mitigating stance occurred as a polarization phenomenon spread worldwide, especially among EU and NATO members and partners. Both international organizations now appear to be more closely knit than ever, which has inevitably reduced Erdoğan's room for maneuver. In addition, this situation has been exacerbated as Turkey experiences a deepening economic recession and Erdoğan attempts to mobilize his constituents for Turkey's 2023 presidential election.²

Against this complex background marked by historical grievances, European and U.S. leaders should take advantage of recent positive trends, to include solidifying NATO and EU cohesion and Erdoğan's search for better positioning, to resume engaging in dialogue with Ankara in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's possible accession to the EU, the inclusion of Cyprus into NATO, the protracted Cyprus crisis, Turkish integration into the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) and related projects, and divergent interests between NATO members such as France and Turkey in Libya are key intertwined issues that Brussels and Washington must address concomitantly in coordination with regional stakeholders in order for Ankara to play a more prominent role in future European security architecture.

What Drives Turkey's Posture?

Since the failed 2016 military coup attempt against Erdoğan, Turkey has claimed a number of regional and international grievances, including alleging that the United States and some European states are harboring or are allied with individuals and groups that Ankara claims are terrorists, such as Syrian Kurdish People's Defense Unit (YPG) militias and the Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen and his followers. Yet, Turkey has a genuine and advantageous strategic position that it can take advantage of to build stronger ties to NATO and the EU. It stands at the crossroads of, first, the influence of Christianity and Islam; second, an underlying competition between NATO

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and Russia; and, finally, maritime transit between the Black and Mediterranean Seas. However, the 2016 coup attempt, which included Turkish military leaders with ties to NATO, made Erdoğan doubt the intentions of his traditional allies, accelerated his move toward authoritarianism, and ultimately resulted in his rapprochement with Russian president Vladimir Putin. Moreover, Turkey's long-stalled EU membership process and Ankara's claims against two EU member states, Greece and Cyprus, are long-standing grievances that have complicated the regional and international posture of Turkey as a strong regional military power.³ Finally, Turkey's exclusion from the EMCF has bolstered its sense of isolation.⁴ In reaction to all of this, Erdoğan seeks to show that his neighbors cannot sideline him from regional energy development, both from political influence and economic standpoints.⁵

Turkey's economic situation balances its geostrategic position and helps explain its leaders' recent political moves. Indeed, Ankara is still Moscow's leading commercial partner in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.⁶ Aware of the stakes in his relationship with Putin, Erdoğan has been seeking other options, such as the Ukrainian market, to diversify Turkey's economy and resource supply.⁷ Turkey's relationship with Ukraine gives Erdoğan a political advantage as a third party in the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia. But Turkey also represents a huge market for gas producers, especially those in the MENA region who are struggling to find consumers.⁸ Therefore, Ankara cannot afford to be sidelined or left out of any economic cooperation mechanisms. Furthermore, recent sanctions or threats of sanctions have added an additional burden on Ankara without providing tangible short-term solutions to current tensions.⁹ On the contrary, because Erdoğan controls the Turkish information sector, he has found a way to shape and leverage the perception of the Turkish population.¹⁰ He still galvanizes a majority of the Turkish electorate against perceived external threats.

The 2023 Turkish presidential election will be crucial because Erdoğan's popularity has been dropping in recent years and the election results will shape Turkish foreign and domestic policies for the medium term.¹¹ Erdoğan has adopted a militaristic and brinkmanship posture to manage domestic political issues.¹² He demonizes his domestic, regional, and international opponents and plays on long-standing Turkish nationalism. In trying to pave its own way, multiplying diversified relationships and taking advantage of scattered opponents, Ankara appears isolated in the current polarized background. This form of disillusionment may threaten Erdoğan's reelection and his traditional political and electoral support base.

A New Chance for Western-Turkish Dialogue and Negotiation

While it seems that Erdoğan has become suspicious about Western intentions, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has proven that Putin also remains unpredictable—and perhaps less powerful than he has previously thought to be. At first, Erdoğan did not think a Russian invasion was likely.¹³ Then, after some hesitation on how to position itself, Ankara declared the invasion a “war,” though Erdoğan's government neither sanctioned Moscow nor closed its airspace to it. Nevertheless, Russia's invasion has probably increased Erdoğan's distrust of Putin and increased divergence between Turkish and Russian national interests, which were already strained due to recent conflicts in Syria, Libya, and the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Above all, the invasion is severely and negatively impacting the Turkish economy, which could jeopardize Erdoğan's reelection.¹⁴

Many countries unanimously spoke out against the Russian invasion of Ukraine from the outset with unexpected vigor. Rather than broadening strategic and political divisions between Western countries, Russia's invasion has led to increasing cohesiveness of NATO and the EU.¹⁵ While Erdoğan, like Putin, has relied on the divergent positions of EU states to chart his own course in the past, he now faces a new paradigm.¹⁶ Consequently, not only may previous Turkish practices no longer bear fruit, but the international community may even handle Turkey's aggressive posture more unitedly. This could lead Ankara to be more cautious in its maneuvering against a more unified West.

The crisis in Ukraine is also triggering the construction of a new European security architecture in which EU states could set aside Turkey. Discussion of Ukrainian membership in the EU is one case in point that could resume debate on the Turkish accession bid. Turkey's recent statements on this issue offers new perspectives even as its willingness to accede to the EU seems to have waned in recent years. But the Turkish case is more complex than the Ukrainian case because, while Kyiv is increasingly complying with EU accession criteria, Erdoğan has in recent years deconstructed Turkey's democratic apparatus in contravention of EU requirements.¹⁷ The gradual restoration of Turkey's democratic institutions and processes will require effort and time. Furthermore, the direct challenges that Turkey poses to two EU members, Greece and Cyprus, add to the complexity of the equation.

A Holistic Approach for Intermingled Challenges

Turkey's recent diplomatic and political posture may reveal a Westward trend that the EU and the United States should

take advantage of to simultaneously address long-term, unresolved issues.¹⁸ Indeed, several recent Turkish actions herald a deescalation of tensions and even a warming of relations with the EU and the United States.¹⁹ By asserting his interest in the stalled process of EU membership, and knowing the gap to cross to meet the required criteria, Erdoğan is indirectly encouraging the resumption of official talks. On the other side, the EU collectively appreciates Erdoğan's current role in the Ukrainian crisis.²⁰ These political postures, among other diplomatic, economic, and military activities, have set a positive trend that could offer greater opportunities for European security. However, with the upcoming presidential election in mind, Erdoğan may also simply want to gain some short-term domestic political capital. To prevent this, the EU needs to propose time-sensitive and tangible objectives.

Part of these objectives, beyond the Copenhagen criteria, is to address the Cyprus issue.²¹ Indeed, as long as Cyprus and Greece perceive Turkey as a threat, they will probably hinder any form of rapprochement between Ankara and Brussels. Conversely, as long as Turkey views both countries as trying to deny the rights of the Turkish minority living in the northern part of Cyprus, Erdoğan will pursue his aggressive attitude and block Cyprus' membership in NATO. Since the failure of the 2004 Annan Plan, a United Nations (UN) proposal to peacefully reunify Cyprus, the UN has decided to leave the peace process to the Cypriot parties themselves.²² Nevertheless, as organizations comprising the main stakeholders, the EU and NATO must play a role in bringing about a fair and final agreement between both sides.

Added to this previous equation, the exclusion of Turkey from the EMGF and discussions taking place in the Eastern Mediterranean region increases Ankara's grievances and emphasizes its feeling of regional isolation.²³ In opposition, Erdoğan decided to challenge the balance of power in the region and, in November 2019, to militarily support Libya's UN-recognized Government of National Accord against Libyan National Army field marshal Khalifa Haftar and his foreign backers, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, and France. In addition, Erdoğan has also signed a memorandum of understanding with Libya that violates Greek and Cypriot sovereignty. The agreement considers the waters between Turkey and Libya as an extension of their continental shelves regardless of internationally recognized borders. Regardless of whether this memorandum has increased regional tensions, it is perhaps worth noting that the current status quo between the main Libyan parties is also the result of Turkey's intervention as a counterweight to other international backers. Paradoxically, this relative stability underscores to some extent Turkey's stabilizing role.

As a key NATO member and an important stakeholder in the Eastern Mediterranean, the United States has a role to play in incentivizing the various actors to compromise. Shared strategic interests with Ankara regarding Turkish influence in Central Asia against Russian and Chinese influence, Black Sea security, support for restoring stability in Libya, and providing humanitarian assistance in Syria, as well as the outsider posture of the United States, can accommodate current stalemates.²⁴ The administration of U.S. president Joseph R. Biden Jr. has asserted its concerns about the Cyprus case and has decided to fully engage in a resolution process.²⁵ Furthermore, the United States has much leverage to engage with Turkey, such as the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act.²⁶ Consequently, the United States and the EU can create new Western relations with Ankara, based on tradeoff, firmness, and mutual trust.

Conclusion

Turkey is an important economic and strategic actor in the Eastern Mediterranean, the MENA region, Central Asia and the Black Sea, and Europe. The EU must seize the opportunity offered by the current geopolitical situation on its eastern flank to make a firm commitment to Turkey, invite it into a new European security architecture, and quell tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. The polarization of NATO and the EU toward Russia and its allies presents a risk to Erdoğan's brinkmanship. As a Turkish ally in the Eastern Mediterranean, the United States has a role to play in addressing the various intertwined issues in coordination with the EU. However, the United States and the EU should not be naive about Erdoğan's short-term objectives and should only accept tangible progress within a binding timeframe. Resuming the Cyprus negotiation to stabilize the region and integrating Turkey into the regional energy hub are the major challenges to establishing a healthy regional climate to attract and retain investors. Western diplomats and politicians need to understand Erdoğan's motivations and ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean and MENA regions in order to ease and address his sense of there being a containment strategy against him.

ENDNOTES

1. Paul Benjamin Osterlund, "Erdoğan: Russia Attack on Ukraine 'Heavy Blow' to Regional Peace," *Al Jazeera*, 24 February 2022.
2. Galip Dalay, "Ukraine's Wider Impact on Turkey's International Future," Chatham House, 10 March 2022.
3. In addition to a long-lasting crisis between Turkey and Greece that followed the Turkish military intervention in Cyprus in

- 1974, there are disagreements over territorial water boundaries as well as ownership of islands in the Aegean Sea.
4. The EMGF is a platform for dialogue and coordination of exploration and exploitation activities that was established in 2019. Its members states include Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. In addition, observer status is held by the EU, the World Bank, France, and the United States. Three Mediterranean countries are absent from the EMGF: Lebanon, which refused an invitation to join; Syria, due to its current domestic situation; and Turkey, which was not invited to join.
 5. Mona Sukkarieh, *The East Mediterranean Gas Forum: Regional Cooperation amid Conflicting Interests* (New York: Natural Resource Governance Institute, 2021), 8.
 6. Dalay, "Ukraine's Wider Impact on Turkey's International Future."
 7. Seckin Kostem, "The Political Economy of Turkish-Russian Relations: Dynamics of Asymmetric Interdependence," *Perceptions* 23, no. 2 (2018): 10–32.
 8. Sukkarieh, *The East Mediterranean Gas Forum*, 14.
 9. The United States has imposed sanctions on the Turkish defense sector and the EU on Turkish oil executives.
 10. Nathalie Tocci, "Unpacking the Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean," *LAI Commentaries* 20, no. 70 (October 2020): 1–4.
 11. Ali Kucukgocmen, "Turkey's Economic Woes Are Hurting Erdoğan: Polls," Reuters, 11 January 2022.
 12. Francesco Siccardi, *How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021).
 13. Carlotta Gall, "Ukraine Invasion Increases Friction between Erdoğan and Putin," *New York Times*, 1 March 2022.
 14. Ceyda Caglayan and Can Sezer, "Russian Invasion of Ukraine Threatens to Hit Turkey's Economy," Reuters, 25 February 2022.
 15. Examples of this include Switzerland stepping out from its traditional neutral stance and Germany making the bold decisions to cancel the Nord Stream II pipeline project and to strengthen its armed forces.
 16. Regarding Turkish activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, then-chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel stated in 2020 that Germany is "taking a different position from [French president Emmanuel] Macron," notably by maintaining an open diplomatic channel with Turkey. See Burhan Ekinci and Arif Rüzgar, "Erdoğan's Fantasy of a Turkish Nationalist, Islamist Empire Poses a Serious Risk for the World," Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 19 October 2020.
 17. Erdoğan has been steadily replacing Turkey's 1923 parliamentary structure to centralize existing checks and balances. See Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, "A Small Yes for Presidentialism: The Turkish Constitutional Referendum of April 2017," *South European Society and Politics* 22, no. 3 (2017): 303–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2017.1384341>.
 18. Greek-Turkish tensions have their roots primarily in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which defined the boundaries of Turkish territory. The interpretation of each of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as well as the threat perceived of each by the other during the decolonization of Cyprus, fuel the tensions between these two neighbors.
 19. For example, in mid-2021, Erdoğan decided to cease his maritime drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, and in March 2022, the Turkish, French, and Italian presidents decided to resume the air defense missile program that French president Emmanuel Macron had halted for political reasons in 2018. See Inder Singh Bisht, "Turkey Exploring Franco-Italian Air Defense System Purchase," *Defense Post*, 30 March 2022.
 20. Serkan Demirtaş, "EU Praises Turkey's Role in Ukraine, Proposes Cooperation," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 7 March 2022.
 21. The Copenhagen criteria are "the essential conditions [that] all candidate countries must satisfy to become a member state" of the EU. See "European Commission: Enlargement: Accession Criteria," European Commission, accessed 13 May 2022.
 22. To solve the Cyprus dispute by forming a country with two federal states is no longer a relevant solution because the population of Cyprus rejected the referendum at that time.
 23. NS Energy states that "Eastern Mediterranean (EastMed) is a 1,900[kilometer] natural gas pipeline project to connect the gas reserves of the eastern Mediterranean to Greece." See "Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline Project," NS Energy, accessed 10 April 2022.
 24. Samuel Ramani, "The U.S. in the Eastern Mediterranean Region," Royal United Services Institute, 1 June 2021.
 25. "Blinken: U.S. Committed to Deepening Cooperation with Cyprus," *Ekathimerini*, 2 February 2022.
 26. Dalay, "Ukraine's Wider Impact on Turkey's International Future."