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Turkish Ambitions in the Mediterranean: Towards an Acceleration of Naval Frictions with Europe?

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The Turkish merchant ship Çirkin, which is used to transit between Turkey and Libya for deliveries of military equipment under the guise of “humanitarian deliveries”, has been escorted by Turkish warships since May 2020 in order to avoid inspection. However, on June 10, shortly after an initial tense confrontation between this Turkish escort and a Greek ship belonging to the European Union Naval Force Operation Irini, a Turkish warship carried out “unfriendly actions” (illumination on 3 occasions with a fire control radar) against the French frigate Courbet, which was part of a NATO operation off Libya. This unusual incident, which clearly represents a new escalation in the tensions already identified in this zone, is part of a deeper logic of increasing tension between the EU (and first and foremost France) and Turkey. These frictions are caused in particular by the problem of the Turkish naval presence in the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and by the difficulties linked to the monitoring of the arms embargo imposed on Libya since 2011 [1]

The hardening stance of the Turkish Navy is, for its part, essentially dictated by the profound redefinition of Turkish geopolitical perceptions since the rise to power of President Recep T. Erdogan, who favors a vast movement of Turkish naval expansionism in the Mediterranean. This movement also seems to be accelerated by the local perception of a possible Western withdrawal from the Middle East, coupled at the same time with a regional eruption of Russian power. These two changes are strategic opportunities of importance for Ankara, which must then take advantage of them to strengthen its geopolitical interests.

Rather “Expansionist” Turkish Geopolitical Perceptions in the Mediterranean

Turkey’s regional ambitions first emerged during a speech by President Erdogan in 2011 in which he proclaimed that Turkey should reside as close as possible to the Suez Canal and the adjacent seas and project itself into the Indian Ocean. This Turkish policy, centered on the renewal of its influence in the

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Middle East (Syria, Qatar, Libya, Iraq, the Horn of Africa), could then be described as “pan-Ottoman” while having the essential characteristic of placing particular emphasis on the naval aspect, especially in the Mediterranean. Indeed, Ankara is calling for an extension of Turkey’s geopolitical presence in the maritime areas of the Mediterranean, and even beyond, in accordance with the doctrine of the Blue Motherland (Mavi Vatan), developed by Admiral Cihat Yaycı [2]. The aim of this doctrine is to eventually obtain Turkish supremacy in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean through multiple territorial claims around the island of Cyprus and in the Greek Dodecanese islands. The search for maritime delimitation agreements with countries willing to “accommodate” Turkish interests is thus particularly highlighted, with this approach being supported upstream by permanent force deployments facilitating the “fait accompli” of Turkey’s “natural” claims.

The new Turkish footprint in Libya is integrally linked to such ambitions, thus transforming an entire Mediterranean zone into an “exclusively Turkish continuum” that would also have the advantage of further isolating Cyprus from the European continent. Both to implement this geopolitical vision and to prevent its adversaries from disrupting its actions, Turkey has gradually developed a strategy of access denial, both off the coast of Cyprus and now also along the Libyan coast. This strategy can be seen in particular in the deployment of large naval forces (groups of several vessels) in its areas of interest (e.g., protection of Turkish drilling activities in the Cypriot EEZ and support for land operations in Libya) and the recurrent reservation of exercise areas on high seas, all of which makes the activities of other navies obviously more complicated in those same regions. In addition, the Turkish Navy also no longer hesitates to deliberately engage in a logic of friction with rival navies, betting that the latter will avoid any armed escalation with their NATO ally.

Increased Military Frictions, Symptoms of a New “Turkish Unilateralism”

For several years Turkey has in fact set up a logic of frictions with its rivals, considering for a long time that the latter will never fully assume the balance of power that is being imposed and, therefore, allowing the imposition of Turkish “faits accomplis” that are difficult to reverse. Frictions involving Turkish units with European vessels have thus multiplied, both in the Aegean Sea and off the coast of Cyprus and now along the Libyan coast. At the same time, the Turkish Navy is increasing the number of demonstrations of strength through increasingly regular large-scale exercises. In the Aegean Sea, episodes of tensions are certainly sporadic but also real with repeated Turkish incursions into Greek territorial waters. At the beginning of May 2020, Turkish fighter aircrafts carried out a demonstration of strength (a “provocative” act according to Greece) over the Greek island of Inousses during a visit there by the Greek Minister of Defense and the Chief of Staff of the Greek Armed Forces. This case had a precedent since in March 2019 a visit by the Greek Prime Minister had already been disrupted by Turkish fighters near the island of Agathonissi, situated in the south-eastern Aegean Sea. Ankara’s territorial claims in the Aegean Sea, particularly those relating to the Dodecanese archipelago, obviously explain these frequent and sometimes very serious incidents [3]. Off the coast of Cyprus, Turkey exerts pressure on and even interferes with international companies carrying out drillings [4]. Turkey also carries out, under naval protection, its own research activities in the Cypriot EEZ, which Turkey partly considers its own. The Turkish militarization of Northern Cyprus (deployment of surveillance drones and the future construction of a naval base) could exacerbate this trend, as these new tools would then make it possible to further support the naval assets deployed all around the island. In Libya, the Turkish naval forces

began by conducting a “precursor” operation off the Libyan and Tunisian coasts in spring 2019. Then, in November 2019, Turkey concluded a maritime delimitation agreement with the Libyan Government of National Accord (on the principle of equidistance) de facto excluding Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt from negotiations [5]. This agreement was logically coupled with a “military cooperation” component that has resulted in the permanent presence of Turkish naval units off the coast of Libya since the beginning of 2020. These unprecedented and substantial deployments mark Turkey’s direct support for the Libyan Government of National Accord as well as the dispatch of pro-Turkish Syrian militiamen and the protection of its deliveries of military equipment (drones, munitions) by sea. Indeed, merchant ships used to transiting between Turkey and Libya are henceforth escorted by Turkish warships to avoid any inspection of it, in particular by French and Greek vessels, as was the case on June 10. Finally, in the long term, Turkey may create a Turkish naval base in Misrata, Libya, and potentially dispatch Turkish combat aircrafts possibly on the al-Watiya base. Turkish investment in Libya would thus become substantial.

In addition to this logic of frictions, the Turkish Navy is conducting increasingly regularly demonstrations of strength in the Mediterranean. In March 2019, the Turkish naval forces held the Mavi Vatan 2019 exercise in the Aegean Sea, Black Sea, and Eastern Mediterranean, their largest naval training sequence since the fall of the Soviet Union. This exercise mobilized some 100 units, including almost all first-rank Turkish vessels. This exercise was repeated a second time (Denizkurdu 2019) on an equivalent scale (more than a hundred ships of all types involved) in May 2019, once again in 3 distinct zones (Black Sea, Aegean Sea, and Eastern Mediterranean). In November 2019, the Doğu Akdeniz 2019 exercise brought together some forty vessels in the Eastern Mediterranean. More recently, in June 2020, Turkey carried out a new “demonstration of force” with the exercise called “Open Sea Training” that saw the participation of 8 ships and 17 fighter aircraft in the Mediterranean (2,000 km from Turkey).

A Resolute Instrumentalization of NATO to Weaken Europe?

With a certain disengagement of the United States from the Middle East scene (to the benefit of its “local allies” to whom American power seems to be willing to subcontract the management of regional crises), Turkey would finally see its ambitions “reinforced” by Washington, which now only thinks in terms of a “power confrontation” with China and Russia. In fact, since 2015 Turkey seems to have taken advantage of the emergence of the “Russian threat” in the Mediterranean to win the favor of the United States and to appear as a reliable and indispensable ally within NATO. The United States has moreover recently and very openly supported the pro-Turkish Libyan camp while deploring the “escalation” represented by the Russian presence in Libya. In this context, the Turkish naval forces have every interest in protecting their actions in Libya through NATO: use of codes and identifiers of the alliance, including during escort missions between Turkey and Libya, refusal of any cooperation between NATO’s Sea Guardian Operation and the European Operation Irini, and opposition to any involvement of NATO in monitoring operations of the embargo off Libya. The United States has moreover recently and very openly supported the pro-Turkish Libyan camp while deploring the “escalation” represented by the Russian

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Because of this (as a minimum) passive support of the United States and NATO of Turkey, the European forces then quickly find themselves isolated and even sometimes divided as to the strategy to be adopted, once again confirming Turkey's policy of *fait accompli*. Operation Irini thus very often comes down to the Franco-Greek couple alone, in line, however, with the growing strategic partnership between the two countries. However, Europe's security could also be at stake in Libya, given the possibility of an unprecedented pro-Turkish geographic continuum [6] in the Mediterranean, which would facilitate both the isolation of Cyprus from the European continent and Turkish migration blackmail vis-à-vis the EU (Turkey would then eventually control two of the three main crossing points for migrants to Europe).

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The naval frictions imposed by Turkey in the Mediterranean thus seem to be dictated by a “neo-Ottoman” geopolitical ambition that seeks to turn the Eastern Mediterranean into a “pro-Turkish lake.” With the passive support of the United States and Europe's reluctance to fully accept the balance of power, Turkey could then seek to pursue this “expansionist” vision in Libya and Cyprus before turning more resolutely to the Dodecanese. Unless there is a major political change in Turkey (or even in the United States) in the coming years, it seems very likely that a lasting rebalancing of power, which is moreover consubstantial with the conception of international relations in the Middle East, will be established between Ankara and the European nations. This deteriorated context could, however, offer a great opportunity for Europe if it wanted to break the Turkish ‘logic’ by taking up precisely this challenge of ‘strength,’ thus undoing once and for all the Gordian Knot of European military weakness.

Notes:

- [1] This embargo was extended for another year on June 5, 2020 by a unanimous vote of the United Nations Security Council. It authorizes inspections of ships on high seas.
- [2] Former Chief of Staff of the Turkish Navy (who was dismissed from his functions on May 18, 2020, apparently for simple domestic political reasons). He is considered to be the founder of this doctrine and the organizer of the Turkish engagement in Libya.
- [3] Some of them in 1987 and 1996 also caused serious crises between both countries.
- [4] In March 2018, Turkish ships forced an ENI ship to stop drilling in Eastern Cyprus.
- [5] An agreement that would allow Turkey to extend the area of its continental shelf by 30%, which would prevent Athens, Nicosia and Cairo from reaching an agreement to delimit their respective maritime zones and would torpedo projects related to the exploitation of these gas reserves.
- [6] The last “Turkish” presence in Libya ended in 1911... shortly before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

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