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III. The View from Turkey

Ankara's increasingly assertive approach to defending its maritime interests, particularly since early 2019, has been driven by two major frustrations: it believes, first, that Turkey and Turkish Cypriots are being excluded from potential energy riches, including by a pipeline plan; and, secondly, that other Mediterranean states are pursuing a containment policy that will chip away at Turkey's sovereignty, economic security and geopolitical reach. But Ankara is also clearly uncomfortable with the idea of being isolated.²⁸ Recently, it has begun making diplomatic overtures to rebuild bridges with regional powers and the West and to undercut backing for Greece.

A. *Cyprus and the Nationalist Turn*

The failure of Erdoğan's efforts to reconcile with adversaries at home and abroad in his first decade in power led to disillusionment among Turkey's political elite and his embrace over time of harder-line approaches.²⁹

As prime minister from 2003 to 2014, Erdoğan took steps to address some of the grievances of Turkey's Kurds and pursued negotiations with the PKK – albeit fitfully – which drew the ire of Turkish nationalists.³⁰ He also took relatively conciliatory positions concerning Cyprus reunification, talks with Athens and normalisation of ties with Yerevan – widely described as a policy of “zero problems with neighbours” – that upended Ankara's foreign policy traditions. He was bolstered in these initiatives by a vibrant economy, friendly relations with Washington and Brussels, and support from Kurds and liberals in Turkey. But Erdoğan won no diplomatic victory on any of these fronts, and in the meantime found himself bleeding votes from nationalists who argued that Ankara's concessions were not serving Turkey's interests. “Any more compromise and he wouldn't have been able to maintain power”, said a presidential palace source.³¹

The situation in Cyprus, which is foremost among the issues shaping Turkey's approach to the eastern Mediterranean today, has played into Erdoğan's political evolution. Following the 1974 invasion that divided the island, Ankara became the only country in the world to recognise the independence of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which was declared in 1983 on the third of the island where Turkey maintains a military presence. Nationalists in Turkey have fiercely defended the de facto republic and its claimed prerogatives ever since. But in the period between 2003-2014, Erdoğan made a volte-face. In the face of nationalist resistance, he supported a settlement plan championed by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to reunify the island at UN-sponsored talks. In tandem, the EU offered Nicosia a path to accession in 2003, with some inside the bloc arguing that the prospect would encourage Turkish Cypriots to support reunification. Turkish Cypriots did in fact vote for the Annan Plan

²⁸ İlhan Uzgöl, “Turkey and the Mediterranean Imbroglia: The Story of an Aspiring Regional Power”, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, November 2020.

²⁹ See “Policy of Zero Problems with Our Neighbours”, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, n.d.

³⁰ See Mesut Yeğen, “The Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey: Genesis, Evolution and Prospects”, Istanbul Şehir University, May 2015.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, January 2021.

in a referendum. Greece backed Nicosia's accession and also supported Turkey's EU aspirations.³²

Still, the settlement plan ultimately failed. In their own referendum, Greek Cypriots rejected the Annan Plan; nevertheless, the Republic of Cyprus joined the EU in 2004.³³ The Turkish foreign ministry warned the EU that the Greek Cypriots did not have "authority to represent the whole of Cyprus or the Turkish Cypriots".³⁴ Leaders in Ankara were also disturbed that the EU failed to fulfil its promises to increase aid and start trade with the de facto Turkish Cypriot entity following the Turkish Cypriot vote in favour of reunification in 2004. (EU leaders at the time had pledged to "put an end to the isolation of the Turkish Cypriot community".³⁵) Despite these disappointments, Erdoğan's AK Party government started its own EU accession negotiations in 2005.³⁶

The unresolved feud over Cyprus fed maritime disputes between Turkey and Greece, and vice versa. Turkey does not recognise the Republic of Cyprus and holds that it cannot enter delimitation agreements or exploit natural resources in the eastern Mediterranean without sharing revenues with the de facto republic in the north. Turkish officials say they began voicing concerns about the rights of Turkish Cypriots when Cyprus signed its first maritime delimitation deal with Egypt in 2003.³⁷ After its EU accession, the Republic of Cyprus went on to sign new delimitation deals, with Lebanon in 2007 and Israel in 2010.³⁸ These all became sources of friction with Ankara.

Turkey also grew embittered by the influence that Greek Cypriots gained over the EU's approach to Turkey. "European countries, in addition to missing opportunities for diplomacy, gave in to the spoiled actions of Greece and the Greek Cypriot admin-

³² "Greece was expecting that in return for its positive stance on Turkey's EU aspirations, it would gain the decoupling of Cyprus' accession to the EU from the prerequisite of a settlement to the Cyprus problem. Equally important was the strong belief of the political elites in Greece that Turkey's Europeanization would build trust and would result in the peaceful resolution of bilateral problems and the full normalization of Greek-Turkish relations". "Greek-Turkish Relations and the Cyprus Dispute: Impact on Turkey-EU Scenarios", FEUTURE, December 2018.

³³ Senior EU diplomats and officials sometimes express regret for the decision to admit the Republic of Cyprus. Crisis Group interviews, EU officials, October 2020-March 2021.

³⁴ "Press Release Regarding the EU Enlargement, 1 May 2004", Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

³⁵ "2576th Council Meeting – General Affairs – Luxembourg", press statement, European Commission, 26 April 2004. See also Crisis Group Europe Report N°171, *The Cyprus Stalemate: What Next?*, 8 March 2006. Erdoğan, then prime minister, said: "As the guarantor country, we did in Cyprus what we had to do. You asked for support for the Annan Plan, we supported it. The [Turkish side in Cyprus] said yes to the Annan Plan, and the Greek side said no. You rewarded them despite they said no, and you punished the side that said yes. Until the isolation of the [de facto northern republic] is annulled, we will never step back regarding the airports and the ports. Everyone should know that. If the negotiations [between Turkey and the EU] are interrupted, we do not care". "Erdoğan's reaction on Cyprus", *Milliyet*, 17 June 2006 (Turkish).

³⁶ "Turkey", European Council website, n.d.

³⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, September 2020. See also the presentation by Ambassador Çağatay Erciyes, director general for bilateral political and maritime-aviation-border affairs, titled "Addressing the East Mediterranean Maritime Dispute and Unilateral Activities: Factual Background and International Law and Turkish Standpoint", 9 December 2019.

³⁸ See the delimitation agreements at the website of the UN Office of Legal Affairs. Lebanon signed but did not ratify the agreement.

istration”, Erdoğan said in November 2020, on the anniversary of the northern de facto republic’s establishment.³⁹ Turkish officials argue that Brussels is partial to the positions of the two EU members involved in the matter, namely Nicosia and Athens; they also hold that maritime delimitation is not an EU competence.⁴⁰

For years, Turkish officials say, their efforts to draw attention to what Ankara saw as unfair actions by the Republic of Cyprus were ignored.⁴¹ Over time, they found increasing reason for concern. After the discovery of gas off the Cyprus coast, international energy majors began exploration in 2011, picking up pace after 2016, amid excitement that the region might prove an alternative to Russian pipeline gas for Europe.⁴² Meanwhile, efforts to reunify the island went nowhere, with the last round of attempts ending in failure in 2017. “We said this is going to lead to problems. The island is still divided: the EU was silent”, a Turkish official said. “We had to do something”.⁴³ Ankara acquired research and drilling ships and sent them – often with naval escorts – into contested waters both north east and west of Cyprus.⁴⁴ “The message was: ‘If you try to go ahead with exploration and a pipeline without including Turkey, you won’t be able to utilise hydrocarbon resources and you will have the constant threat of your neighbour’”, the same official said.⁴⁵

Against this backdrop, and particularly after the 2016 coup attempt, Erdoğan and his AK Party increasingly relied on the support of nationalists in parliament and among state cadres. This nationalist turn empowered people who had long opposed Erdoğan’s tentative attempts at diplomacy with traditional foes. These politicians and bureaucrats, who catapulted to positions of power after the coup attempt, believe Ankara’s compromising stances in earlier years led to Turkey’s interests being ignored

³⁹ “President Erdoğan: An unfair equation in the eastern Mediterranean cannot produce peace and stability”, Anadolu Ajansı, 15 November 2020 (Turkish).

⁴⁰ “Sea is not like land. The EU doesn’t have jurisdiction”, a Turkish official complained. Furthermore, Turkey asserts its right under international law to engage in seismic exploration in contested EEZs because – unlike drilling – prospecting does no permanent environmental damage. So, when the European Council issues statements condemning the actions of Turkish seismic research vessels, such as the *Oruç Reis*’ movements near Kastellorizo, Ankara sees the body as siding with Greek maximalist claims. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, September 2020–January 2021. Also see Sinan Ülgen, “Whose Sea? The EU’s Role in the Eastern Mediterranean – A View from Turkey”, Institut Montaigne, 13 October 2020.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Istanbul, January 2021.

⁴² From 2007 onward, the Republic of Cyprus issued tenders to hand out exploration licences to international energy companies including Eni (Italy), Exxon and Noble (Chevron) (U.S.), Total (France), Kogas (South Korea), Qatar Petroleum and Delek (Israel). “The Cyprus Hydrocarbons Issue: Context, Positions and Future Scenarios”, op. cit.

⁴³ Crisis Group telephone interview, September 2020.

⁴⁴ Since late 2012, Turkey has bought three drilling vessels (*Fatih*, *Yavuz* and *Kanuni*). Ankara also bought one seismic exploration vessel (*Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa*) and built a second (*Oruç Reis*). Except for the *Kanuni*, which Ankara deployed for energy exploration in the Black Sea in early 2020, it appears that all these ships have surveyed areas around Cyprus, starting with *Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa* in 2014, or elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean. Based on Crisis Group review of Turkish media.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, September 2020.

and emboldened Cyprus and Greece.⁴⁶ In the words of a Turkish official: “They turned to us and said, ‘We told you so’”.⁴⁷ With the AK Party’s formal alliance with the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in early 2018, the government moved to a yet harder line in its eastern Mediterranean policy.

B. *A Convergence of Adversaries*

Ankara has also felt increasingly threatened by what it sees as a hostile axis seeking to cage it into a small corner of the Mediterranean. Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, it has been trying to counter what it views as a campaign by the UAE, Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia to blunt Turkish influence in the Middle East and North Africa.⁴⁸ It sees a worrying convergence between these actors and Greece, the Republic of Cyprus and Israel.⁴⁹ Plans by the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, Israel and Greece to run a 1,900km pipeline to Europe for gas extracted from the eastern Mediterranean, bypassing Turkey, seemed to justify these fears.⁵⁰ The formation of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum – including the above four countries plus Italy, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan – confirmed them. The U.S. backed the forum, and France has shown interest in joining.

Turkey began looking for ways to counter developments that it saw as boxing it in. One was readiness to go toe to toe with NATO allies such as Greece and France on the seas. In 2019, Ankara sent seismic research vessels into waters claimed by the Republic of Cyprus, also with naval escorts, provoking EU sanctions on two executives of Turkey’s state-owned energy firm. Another was military intervention abroad: Turkey saw Libya as the only remaining eastern Mediterranean littoral state with which it had friendly ties. In 2019, Ankara threw its weight behind Libya’s UN-backed government of Prime Minister Faiez Serraj to prevent Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s rival forces from toppling him.⁵¹ Ankara signed a security cooperation deal and a maritime agreement with Tripoli on the same day in November 2019.⁵²

No country other than Libya accepts the legality of Turkey’s delimitation scheme, but from Ankara’s point of view, it achieves key objectives.⁵³ In the short term, it

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, January 2021. Also see “All About Blue Homeland | Cihat Yaycı | PANKUŞ-291”, video, YouTube, 6 September 2020 (Turkish); also see Cihat Yaycı, *Libya is Turkey’s Sea Neighbour* (Istanbul, 2020), p. 40 (Turkish).

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Istanbul, January 2021.

⁴⁸ For background, see Joost Hiltermann, “Tackling the MENA Region’s Intersecting Conflicts”, Crisis Group Commentary, 13 February 2018.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Istanbul and Ankara, September 2020–March 2021.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, December 2020. “Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline Project”, NS Energy website, n.d.

⁵¹ Crisis Group Europe Report N°257, *Turkey Wades into Libya’s Troubled Waters*, 30 April 2020. The text of the memorandum, which was ratified on 5 December 2019, is available in Turkish, Arabic and English on the Turkish parliament’s website.

⁵² In 2011, the Arab uprisings interrupted Turkish diplomatic efforts to conclude agreements with Muammar al-Qaddafi’s Libya and Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt that would have staked Ankara’s own claims. Crisis Group Report, *Turkey Wades into Libya’s Troubled Waters*, op. cit.

⁵³ Ankara submitted the map, which establishes an 18.6-nautical mile (35km) maritime boundary between Turkey and Libya, to the UN. Most of the Turkish EEZ and part of the Libyan EEZ claimed under the agreement overlap with waters Athens considers part of its continental shelf generated by

allows Ankara to delay through lawsuits (and therefore raise the cost of) the construction of the eastern Mediterranean natural gas pipeline that Greece, Israel and the Republic of Cyprus want to develop. In the long term, it lays the groundwork for pressing Egypt and Israel to backtrack on agreements for the delimitation of EEZs they reached with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus. Ankara hopes that these countries would then sign new maritime delimitation agreements with Turkey, which would grant them larger areas of jurisdiction than their existing deals do, at the expense of Athens and Nicosia's claims.

Some officials in Ankara presented the maritime agreement with Libya as part of a relatively new conception of national defence, in which the Turkish "homeland" (*vatan*) encompasses not only land but also sea, or the "blue homeland" (*mavi vatan*).⁵⁴ Although this concept appears in domestic debates, state officials say it is not official policy.⁵⁵ The admiral who years ago coined this concept, Cem Gürdeniz, argued in August 2020 that it was a necessary response to Greece, which was "getting backing from the anti-Turkey approach of the U.S. and EU in the eastern Mediterranean, Syria and Libya".⁵⁶ Hardliners see evidence of such an approach in a 2004 map prepared by two Spanish academics that extrapolates EEZs based on littoral states' potential claims, which shows Turkey's Mediterranean access restricted to the Gulf of Antalya and illustrates Ankara's worst-case scenario.⁵⁷ Once referenced only among Turkish Eurosceptics, the so-called Seville map is increasingly cited by officials as a source of disquiet – though both Athens and Brussels deny endorsing it.⁵⁸ "This comes up again and again from the Turkish side", an EU official said.⁵⁹

a number of Greek islands. "Turkey, Libya maritime deal sent to UN: Erdogan", Anadolu Agency, 7 December 2019.

⁵⁴ The concept prescribes that Turkey exercise greater control over the three seas that surround it – the Aegean, Black and Mediterranean – to secure trade routes and natural resources, including fish and seabed mineral deposits.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, March 2021. Foreign ministry representatives say the "blue homeland" maps reflect the aspirations of certain circles but not the state's formal position on the areas over which it claims sovereignty. They say the official position is represented by the amended map Turkey submitted to the UN Secretary-General and Secretariat after signing its agreement with Tripoli on 30 September 2020. See tweet by Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, @mevlutcavusoglu, Turkish foreign minister, 4:48pm, 1 October 2020.

⁵⁶ Cem Gürdeniz, "The Turkish nations' response to imperialism on the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Sèvres: Blue Homeland", *Cumhuriyet*, 13 August 2020 (Turkish).

⁵⁷ Nationalist and pro-government Turkish outlets have since 2018 increasingly referenced the map as epitomising attempts to trap Turkey in a small corner of the eastern Mediterranean. "What is the Seville map?", *Yeniçağ*, 22 September 2020 (Turkish). The "Seville map" is named after the university where the two Spanish academics who drafted it teach. The professors submitted their paper in 2004, and published it in 2006, as part of a study commissioned by the EU, which outlines the potential EEZs of littoral states by drawing the boundary at a point equidistant between eastern Greek islands (taking into account even the smallest ones, such as Megisti/Meis) and the Turkish coast. Juan Luis Suárez de Vivero and Juan Carlos Rodríguez Mateos, "Maritime Europe and EU Enlargement: A Geopolitical Perspective", *Marine Policy*, vol. 30 (2006), pp. 167-172; "The Seville map that challenges Turkey, Greece, the U.S. and the EU", Keep Talking Greece, 22 September 2020.

⁵⁸ In a September 2020 interview, for example, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu said: "[Greece] must give up the Seville map", referring to Greece's position as derived from a 2011 Greek law, but describing it through reference to the map. "Breaking news: Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu answers CNN Türk's questions", CNN Türk, 17 September 2020 (Turkish). Greece's position is codified in

While Ankara lays claim under its deal with Libya to maritime areas west of the 28th meridian, it has refrained from gas exploration or exploitation there. Before 2019, Turkey had seen the 28th meridian as its de facto maritime border with Greece, stretching from its southern coastal town of Marmaris to Egypt's northern coast (west of Alexandria) and crossing the Greek island of Rhodes.⁶⁰ During the mid-2020 standoff, the *Oruç Reis* did not cross this meridian.⁶¹ Hardliners like former Turkish Admiral Cihat Yaycı, for example, say Turkey should do so nonetheless: "Conducting exercises ... [is] futile. To establish that these areas belong to us, the only way is to send seismic survey and drilling ships".⁶² In April 2020, Turkey's state-owned energy company TPAO applied to obtain survey and drilling licences in new maritime areas to the west of this line.⁶³ Turkish officials say no decision has yet been made on whether they are likely to grant the licences.

C. A Two-pronged Approach

As of late 2020, Ankara's muscular foreign policy has come with diplomacy aimed at peeling away EU, Egyptian and Israeli support for Greece.⁶⁴ Erdoğan said in December 2020 that he sought to "turn a new page" in ties with EU and in January that exploratory talks with Greece "will herald a new era".⁶⁵ He promised human rights reforms – an area where EU criticism has caused friction – though prospects seem dim for meaningful progress.⁶⁶ Turkish officials say it is only a matter of time before ties with Cairo, severed since the coup deposing President Muhammad Morsi in 2013, im-

what is known as the "Maniatis Law", Law N°4001/2011 on hydrocarbon explorations. "Greek-Turkish dispute over the delimitation of the continental shelf", Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 June 2018. In answer to a question from the Turkish daily *Hürriyet*, the European Commission clarified the legal status of the "Seville map", stating that "external reports commissioned by institutions are not official documents of the EU and have no legal or political value for the EU". "Bad news for Greece from the EU: That map is invalid", *Hürriyet*, 20 August 2020 (Turkish).

⁵⁹ Crisis Group online interview, December 2020.

⁶⁰ For a list of Turkey-relevant UN documents, including submissions by Ankara, on maritime boundaries and delimitation, see the Turkey page of the UN Division of Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea website.

⁶¹ Crisis Group tracking of *Oruç Reis* movements over the middle months of 2020. See tweets by Berkay Mandiracı, @BerkayMANDIRACI, Crisis Group analyst, 6:00am, 26 November 2020. For 2012 licensing area, see the map attached to the Turkish Council of Ministers decision dated 27 April 2012. Crisis Group telephone interview, Greek diplomat, March 2, 2020.

⁶² Yaycı resigned in May 2020, upon being appointed to another post, saying his new position would in effect have left him idle, with no responsibility in the domain to which he had dedicated his career. "Associate Professor Cihat Yaycı explained the recent developments in the East Med", video, YouTube, 7 December 2020 (Turkish). Some Turkish experts suggest that he was pushed out as part of a power struggle with top commanders or in a bid by Ankara to distance itself from the "blue homeland" concept. "The backdrop of Cihat Yaycı's resignation", *Habertürk*, 18 May 2020 (Turkish).

⁶³ "TPAO has applied for new drilling licenses in the Eastern Mediterranean! The ministry shared a map", *Hürriyet*, 2 June 2020 (Turkish).

⁶⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, September 2020.

⁶⁵ "Turkey hopes to turn new page with U.S. and EU in 2021, Erdogan says", Reuters, 23 December 2020; "Erdogan hopes new Turkey-Greece talks will herald new era", Reuters, 12 January 2021.

⁶⁶ "President Erdoğan: We hope to turn a new page with the USA and Europe", NTV, 13 December 2020 (Turkish); Speech titled "The uncertainty that has heightened with Brexit will be dissipated with Turkey taking its rightful place in the European family", Turkish Presidency website, 12 January 2021.

prove; Egyptian officials play down the prospect.⁶⁷ In March, the Turkish foreign minister revived the possibility of a maritime deal with Egypt.⁶⁸ Turkey and Israel have also hinted at normalising relations, though big disagreements remain.⁶⁹ In December 2020, Turkey said Israel's hydrocarbon resources would most efficiently be traded to other markets via Turkey, and in March 2021 Israel's energy minister said the Israelis would like to see Turkey in the East Mediterranean Gas Forum.⁷⁰ Turkey has also made overtures to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁷¹

The change of tack appears to be driven in part by economic worries. With support in the polls slipping, Erdoğan's ruling coalition is balancing such concerns against the foreign policy sensitivities of nationalist voters, whom some opposition parties are also vying for. Amid the blow dealt by pandemic restrictions and the lira's nose dive, most polls show that combined support for the AK Party and its ally, the MHP, has fallen below 50 per cent.⁷² A majority of Turks see "making ends meet/unemployment" as the country's most pressing problems.⁷³ Driven by economic concerns, the public's view of the EU is improving, with support for EU membership well above 50 per cent throughout 2019 and 2020.⁷⁴ The AK Party's defeat in Turkey's three largest cities in 2019 municipal elections highlighted the challenge ahead of presidential and general elections scheduled for 2023. Faced with these problems,

⁶⁷ "Process for second S-400 batteries continues, Bloomberg, 8 March 2021 (Turkish); "In the face of isolation, Erdogan reaches out to Egypt", Voice of America, 9 March 2021.

⁶⁸ Ankara said Cairo had respected Turkey's continental shelf claims in announcing new exploration bids. "Turkey says it may negotiate maritime demarcation with Egypt", Reuters, 3 March 2021.

⁶⁹ "Israel needs a reset with Turkey to contain Iran", *Haaretz*, 24 March 2021.

⁷⁰ "After Egypt now Israel: We are ready to cooperate with Turkey, *Star*, 9 March 2021 (Turkish); "Salient Turkey statement from Netanyahu", *Shalom*, 11 March 2021 (Turkish).

⁷¹ "Turkey, Saudi Arabia set to have further dialogue: Turkish foreign minister", Anadolu Agency, 11 May 2021; "UAE-Turkey: Emirati foreign minister calls Turkish counterpart for first time in five years", *Middle East Eye*, 23 April 2021.

⁷² "Average of sixteen polls: AKP at 36.3, MHP at 9.6, CHP at 24.8", *Diken*, 2 March 2021 (Turkish); "With poll support dropping, Erdogan's party looks to change Turkish election law: officials", Reuters, 2 March 2021. According to a February 2021 survey by a polling company close to the government, the ruling alliance's support stood at just over 52 per cent. "Optimar's latest election poll: The people's alliance passes 52 per cent", Haber 7, 7 February 2021 (Turkish).

⁷³ To this question, 15.3 per cent said "fighting the pandemic", 10.4 per cent said "terror and security", 9 per cent "education" and 3 per cent "a new constitution". A further 4.2 per cent had "no idea/no response". "Turkey's Pulse", MetroPoll Strategic and Social Research, February 2021. In a 2020 poll, when asked which country posed the biggest threat to Turkey, respondents ranked Greece fourth after the U.S., Israel and Russia. "Dimensions of Polarisation in Turkey – 2020", TurkuazLab, December 2020. A survey conducted before tensions rose in July 2020 asked whether or not Greece presented a threat: 58.9 per cent of the Turks said yes. "Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy", Kadir Has University, June 2020.

⁷⁴ "Support for EU membership reaches 60 per cent", *Diken*, 7 February 2020 (Turkish); "Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy", op. cit. In a poll conducted in April-May 2019, around 75 per cent of those supportive of Turkey's EU accession said they thought the EU would bring prosperity and economic development. "The Turkish Public's Perceptions on Europe and Support for the European Union 2019", Economic Development Foundation, October 2019 (Turkish).

the government is keener to maintain European direct investment, to attract European tourists and to upgrade its customs union with the EU.⁷⁵

A fault line has emerged within Turkish officialdom between those for and those against salvaging relations with the West; among the former, some believe that tensions with Greece risk spoiling the effort. “Some nationalist circles want to reorient Turkey away from the West, but there are others in the government and state who are pro-NATO and want to preserve Euro-Atlantic links”, said a pro-Western veteran of debates on this issue.⁷⁶ Officials seeking better ties with EU capitals and Washington say improved relations would undercut support for Greece that they believe has emboldened Athens and made it more reluctant to compromise.⁷⁷ Turkish officials complain of “hostile” statements by Athens painting Turkey as “provocative” or “the enemy”.⁷⁸

Yet maximalist positions still dominate the public discussion, with former military figures calling for Turkey to build bases on contested islets and rocks in the Aegean.⁷⁹ As a Turkish think-tank representative told Crisis Group: “Segments of the state will stand against any compromise and they are pumping their narrative into society”.⁸⁰ Some figures influential in shaping public debate go as far as to say Turkey has rights over a greater sweep of sea even than envisioned by the “blue homeland” maps, including to the north and south of Crete.⁸¹ A retired Turkish staff colonel vocal on these issues says Greece has occupied seventeen islands since the AK Party came to power and Turkey should reclaim them.⁸² More moderate voices, who say the “blue homeland” concept hinders efforts to reach a settlement with Greece, are shunned

⁷⁵ European direct investment accounts for over 60 per cent of Turkey’s total on average, while Europeans make up more than half the tourists visiting Turkey. In 2019, almost twenty million Europeans visited Turkey. “FDI Inflows to Turkey”, Investment Office of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. Data on foreign tourists visiting Turkey shared by the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies. In 2019, foreign direct investments in Turkey totalled around \$9 billion, a more than 50 per cent drop from \$19 billion back in 2015. “Foreign Direct Investment, Net Inflows (BoP, Current US\$) – Turkey”, World Bank Database, n.d.

⁷⁶ Turkish speaker, “The Eastern Mediterranean as a Contested Maritime Space”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute online event, 28 September 2020.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Turkish officials, January and March 2021.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group correspondence, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, April 2021.

⁷⁹ Retired Turkish Staff Colonel Ümit Yalım, for instance, claims that Greece has militarised 21 of the 23 islands incrementally since the 1960s. “We need to open military bases in the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean”, *Milli Gazete*, 6 July 2020 (Turkish). Yalım also claims that Greece is occupying islands that were not mentioned in the 1913 London Treaty and 1923 Lausanne Treaty dictating which islands Turkey needs to hand over to Greece – as well as others that Turkey surrendered to Italy (which Italy, he claims, later illegally handed over to Greece) in the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty. He complains that the West has ignored Turkey’s concerns about demilitarisation, adding that the only way to respond effectively is in kind, such as by building up militarily in the Aegean, including on islands that are not covered by treaties but where Turkey has sovereign rights. “Doğu Akdeniz krizinin sorumluları Cihat Yaycı, Cem Gürdeniz ve Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu”, video, YouTube, 6 September 2020. See also “We need to open military bases in the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean”, op. cit.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group online interview, September 2020.

⁸¹ Ümit Yalım, “Legal Status of Aegean Islands”, 21st Century Turkey Institute, 12 November 2018 (Turkish).

⁸² “Ümit Yalım: Isn’t this part of our homeland?”, *Sözcü*, 5 October 2020 (Turkish).

from state media outlets and labelled traitors on social media.⁸³ Main opposition parties blame the AK Party for Turkey's soured relations with the U.S., EU, Egypt and Israel but call on the government to stand its ground in talks with Greece, framing possible concessions as "submission".⁸⁴

In the face of long-term geostrategic concerns and short-term public opinion considerations, Ankara is likely to continue with the two-pronged approach to Turkey's disputes in the Mediterranean – balancing muscle flexing with diplomacy. Overtures to the West do not necessarily mean a softening of Turkey's policies toward Greece or the Republic of Cyprus. Ankara sees the latter as linked to the core of its sovereignty and political parties of almost all stripes are united around fairly hawkish stances. Moreover, until Turkey is included in a regional platform, it is likely to continue hydrocarbon exploration to highlight the unsustainability of the status quo, while seeking arrangements with Egypt and Israel to strengthen its hand. At the same time, even if its posture remains assertive, it will also try to maintain talks with Greece to de-escalate tensions. In short, Erdoğan will want to keep his options open, to see which route leads to more domestic political and strategic wins, including with regard to Cyprus.

⁸³ In a September 2020 interview, former Admiral Cihat Yaycı, who advocates the *mavi vatan* approach, said: "I don't think those contradicting *mavi vatan* are Turks. They are funded by the EU, by Turkey's foes, Greek, Greek Cypriot lobbies. ... I can say they are at best ignorant but going further are traitors". See "All About Blue Homeland | Cihat Yaycı | PANKUŞ-291", op. cit. "People who have opinions that contradict the 'blue homeland' concept or criticise Turkey's agreement with Libya are deemed either ignorant or traitors", a Turkish maritime expert said. Crisis Group online interview, November 2020.

⁸⁴ The main opposition party CHP and second most popular opposition party İYİ regularly delivered harsh messages warning Erdoğan not to compromise on the eastern Mediterranean or the Aegean. Crisis Group review of statements made by senior CHP and İYİ party figures from January 2020 to February 2021. "Parliament supports government's gas drilling activities in east Med Sea", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 19 July 2019. See CHP spokesperson Faik Öztrak's statement to the press, broadcast on the party's YouTube channel: "Greece is aware of Turkey's diplomatic loneliness. It aspires again to accomplish its long-lasting empty dreams". Video, YouTube, 4 September 2020.