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Turkey poses a different kind of challenge for the EU in the Mediterranean, and both Brussels and individual EU members must find it difficult to deal with it in the region. The Cyprus issue, Turkish-Greek maritime problems among other issues, Turkey's assertive policy in the Eastern Mediterranean maritime disputes and energy exploration rights, its military engagement in Libya, its use of refugees as leverage against the EU are some of the challenges for the EU.

In fact, Turkey is not an ordinary southern neighbor, and it occupies a unique place in the Mediterranean basin. It is a Muslim majority country but an associate member of the EU, a member of the Council of Europe, a NATO member with a strong army and navy presence with a growing military-industrial base, and having the biggest economy among the non-EU members in the region, it has more democratic experience than any other Muslim majority southern countries despite its persistent inefficiencies. Apart from its objective qualifications, Turkey is also an aspiring country in competition with some of the EU members, aiming to exert its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, and more importantly, it has proved that it has the will to use force when and if necessary. None of the littoral

states caused so much trouble for the EU and particular EU members.

It should be stated that Turkey has been officially part of the EU-led initiatives since the Barcelona Process started in 1995. However, over time, its approach to the EU in the Mediterranean shifted from limited cooperation to competition and eventually to an adversarial confrontation.

Unlike the Black Sea, which Turkey occasionally cooperates with Russia and has a multilateral attitude, unilateralism and security dominated outlook define Turkey's approach to the Mediterranean. Moreover, the East Med is considered a bulwark, a geopolitical sphere where Turkey should confront its perceived threats. Moreover, for the last five years, both due to its traditional oversensitive threat assessments and the rise of nationalist political forces domestically, the region has become an area of geopolitical struggle for Turkey.

As part of its recent militarization of foreign policy, Turkey has used its army, navy, and intelligence intensively in an area stretching from Iraq to Libya. At its "nationalist-Islamist moment," Turkey adopted a "forward defense" strategy

that envisioned the control of critical cross border areas and strong navy presence, and installing military bases. Along with this strategy, Turkey has become part of every problem in the broader region and has become a party to many of the ongoing conflicts.

At the same time, Turkey has been suffering from political psychology of encirclement, a sense of siege that led to the antagonistic perception of the West, which eventually paved the way for a more aggressive foreign policy posture. This view is prevalent in the current Islamist-nationalist ruling coalition and occasionally shared by the opposition and widely supported by the public. This dialectic of a Western world bent on undermining Turkey's rise, and Turkey, as a regional power, is pre-determined to dominate the region caused severe adverse effects for Turkey, the area and the EU.

Turkey has engaged in a contradictory path in the last decade, especially concerning the Eastern Mediterranean. While it has sought to exert its influence in the region, it has alienated many actors, thus leading to its self-imposed isolation. The actors that it is trying to rely on are either weak or need Turkey's help, such as Hamas and the Sarraj government in Libya. Meanwhile, Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, France, Israel, the UAE, and the US enhanced their cooperation, which led to a severe imbalance of forces in the East Med leaving Turkey isolated and confronting a huge but diverse bloc.

Realizing that it is marginalized on the military, diplomatic, and energy fronts, and in order to break its isolation and alarmed by the establishment of the East Med Gas Forum in January 2020 which also excluded Turkey, Ankara signed two agreements with the Sarraj government, one is a Memorandum of Understanding considering the delimitation of the maritime borders, and the second is on the military cooperation which made Turkey officially part of the conflict in this country's civil war. Turkey also used its navy to

deter natural gas explorations by some of the EU member's oil companies like ENI. All these developments disrupted Turkey's ties with the EU. Brussels was also not happy that Turkey engaged in exploration activities in disputed waters zones. While Turkey is seen as a revisionist power by the EU, the prevailing sentiment in Turkey that the EU and individual EU members (along with the US) are destabilizing factors for Turkey and that they are trying to box Turkey in its limited coastal areas. This impasse is not working for the good of the Turkish people, the EU, and the region.

The problem with Turkey that it is highly dependent on the EU on trade, investment, and tourism. And Ankara uses tensions for domestic purposes. However, the EU's threat to use sanctions backfires and does not solve any problem other than boosting anti-EU sentiments and nationalism in Turkey. It should be stated that the instrumentalization of the refugees on the part of Turkey is more problematic from a humanitarian perspective.

One of the ways for a more moderate Turkish foreign policy behavior is to reinstitute democratization in Turkey, an area that has been dropped in Turkish-EU relations. Foreign policy starts at home, and without a healthy civil society and democratization, the nationalist fervor will likely continue to dominate the Turkish political scene, which has substantial impact on its foreign policy.

The public perception of the EU is thoroughly negative in Turkey, especially concerning handling the maritime border issues. Turkey might have some maximalist demands like its claim that the islands cannot be entitled EEZ; Greece has its maximalist position, such as asking for a full effect on EEZ for its tiny island Kastellorizo which is only a mile off the shore of Turkey. Although understandably, the EU needs to stand in unity, the Turkish public is eager to see a more balanced and unbiased approach from the EU, at least in some issues.

Not only exploratory meetings and de-confliction mechanism between Greece and Turkey but also de-militarization is necessary since the region has been too militarized recently. With the US military redirection to the East Med, a renewed French interest, the new players such as the UAE, Khalifa Hafter, the Wagner group, Islamist jihadists packed into a small region made it prone to tensions. The EU should not only urge Turkey and Greece for negotiations, but

an overall call for demilitarization of the region seems necessary.

A policy of inclusion rather than exclusion would bore fruit in terms of urging Turkey for democratization, and for a mild foreign policy agenda. A Turkey that is closer to the EU would be a more respectful country to human rights, and it might turn into a good partner that could contribute to the stability in the region.

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