

TROUBLED WATERS: ON EU-TURKEY RELATIONS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Tensions in the eastern Mediterranean soared last week, with Turkey sending an exploration vessel, accompanied by a Navy fleet, to the disputed waters and France despatching warships to assist Greece. The trigger for the recent hostility between Turkey and Greece, which have historically shared troublesome relations, has been the discovery of gas in the Mediterranean waters. The EU's plans to transport the gas to its mainland, which would help reduce its dependency on Russia, have raised the region's geopolitical profile. Turkey and Greece have overlapping maritime claims. But when EU members and its allies in West Asia and North Africa made plans to build a gas pipeline from the Mediterranean to Europe's mainland, they kept Turkey out of it, which infuriated Ankara. Earlier this year, the EastMed Gas Forum was formed by Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and Palestine, and Turkey was again excluded. But Turkey challenged the pipeline project and reached an agreement with Libya's Tripoli-based government, which Ankara is backing, to form an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) from its southern shores to Libya's northern coast across the Mediterranean. Greece claimed the Turkish zone violated its maritime sovereignty. Later, Greece announced its EEZ with Egypt, which clashes with Turkey's zone. Immediately thereafter, Turkey sent its survey ship over.

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The highly complicated issue now has the potential to involve Europe, West Asia and North Africa. It is difficult to demarcate the maritime boundaries in the eastern Mediterranean, which is dotted with Turkish and Greek islands. Cyprus is physically divided with the southern part ruled by the internationally-recognised government and the northern part controlled by Turkey. Turkey's survey ship plans exploration activities around Greece's Crete Island, which lies just outside the Turkish-Libya economic zone, and Greece and Cyprus call it a violation of their sovereignty. France, the EU's most powerful military force, has thrown its weight behind Greece and Cyprus. Now, an alliance is emerging among Greece, Cyprus, Italy and France, which is backed by Egypt, Israel and the UAE. Turkey stands almost isolated, but remains a key power in the Mediterranean, which requires the EU to tread cautiously. If the EU wants to transport gas from the coast of Israel to Europe via Cyprus and Italy, an open conflict with Turkey cannot help. What is in everybody's interest is to dial down tensions and find a diplomatic and mutually acceptable solution to the gas contest. Excluding Turkey, which has a long Mediterranean coast, is unwise. Allowing a resurgent Turkey to bully smaller powers in the region would be strategically disastrous. The EU has to strike a balance between these two options.

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