

Greek-Turkish standoff escalates war danger in eastern Mediterranean

By Alex Lantier
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The escalating confrontation in the eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and Greece has reached a new and dangerous stage. Top officials of NATO member states are openly threatening to wage war against one another in conflicts that could set the Mediterranean and the world ablaze.

Last Thursday, Turkish F-16 jets blocked Greek F-16s off Crete from overflying disputed zones of the eastern Mediterranean where Turkey is drilling for oil and gas. In July, Greek and Turkish naval flotillas steamed directly towards each other, avoiding a clash only at the last minute when Berlin intervened, calling Ankara and ordering the Turkish ships to change course. Tensions escalated in August, when France dispatched two warships and Rafale jets to back Greece.

The European Union (EU) foreign ministers meeting on Friday in Berlin marked a further shift to a more aggressive stance, backing Greece against Turkey. After the meeting, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borell said: “We are clear and determined in defending European Union interests and solidarity with Greece and Cyprus. Turkey has to refrain from unilateral actions.”

Borell indicated the EU could adopt economic sanctions to strangle the Turkish economy later this month. While thanking “the efforts deployed by Germany in this attempt to look for solutions through dialogue between Turkey and Greece and Cyprus,” he expressed the EU’s “growing frustration” with Turkey and proposed sanctions against Turkish officials. He added that broader “restrictive measures could be discussed at the European Council on 24-25 September.”

In follow-up questions, Borell explained that the EU could target industries “in which the Turkish economy is more interrelated with the European economy.”

The same day, President Emmanuel Macron issued an extraordinary threat, comparing French deployments in Greece to the “red line” policy that saw France, Britain

and the United States bomb Syria. This 2018 bombing, based on fraudulent allegations that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons, led Moscow to accelerate its build-up of Syrian air defences.

Macron said his policy is based on the view that aggressive military action is the only way forward. “When it comes to Mediterranean sovereignty, I must be consistent in deeds and word,” he said. “I can tell you that the Turks only consider and respect that. If you say words that are not followed by acts ... What France did this summer was important: it’s a red line policy. I did it in Syria.”

Turkish officials responded this weekend by warning that the Greek policy backed by the EU could provoke war. They cited Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis’ threats to expand Greece’s exclusive economic zone from six to 12 miles—including around Greek islands directly off the coast of Turkey—and reports that Greece is strengthening its ground forces on these islands.

“This would be grounds for war, a *casus belli*,” declared Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, while Vice President Fuat Oktay said: “If it is not grounds for war, what is it?”

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, “Their aim is to imprison our country, which has the longest coastline in the Mediterranean, into a coastal strip from which you can only catch fish with a rod.” Ankara has already staked out extensive maritime claims, blocking projected gas pipelines from Israel, via Cyprus and Greece, to Italy and the European mainland.

The eastern Mediterranean conflict is the outcome of decades of imperialist wars, particularly the NATO wars in Libya, Syria and Iraq since 2011. These wars plunged Libya into a decade-long civil war and triggered a devastating proxy war between NATO-backed militias and the Russian-, Chinese- and Iranian-backed regime in

Syria. Now rivalries over undersea oil and gas have lit the fuse in a region that, as when World War I began in 1914, threatens to erupt into a regional and global war.

Both the Turkish and Greek governments, devastated by a decade of EU austerity, are unpopular and seeking to prop themselves up by inciting war fever. This policy unfolds, however, amid a swirling morass of global conflicts over markets and strategic advantage, similar to the economic rivalries that plunged Europe into World War I, that are relentlessly fuelling the Mediterranean stand-off.

Geopolitically, the region is not only critical to efforts by the US and Europe to reassert their positions in the Middle East and Africa after their Syrian defeat, but also to Europe's energy supply, and China's attempts to build up trade ties to Europe via the Middle East in its Belt and Road Initiative.

It is widely acknowledged that the disintegration of US imperialism's former hegemonic position is fuelling the conflict. In an editorial board statement, "There's a New Game of Thrones in the Mediterranean," the *New York Times* pointed to the far-reaching implications of the collapse of US influence.

Stating that "only Germany seems to have the sway to mediate a return to sanity" in a "new and dangerous crisis," it added: "In an earlier era, the United States would have stepped in to separate feuding NATO partners, as it did when Greece and Turkey almost went to war in 1996. President Trump did make a call to Mr. Erdogan urging him to negotiate, but that had no effect—the United States under the Trump administration is not regarded as a viable go-between..."

The Libyan war has, moreover, divided both Middle Eastern and European countries between backers of the Islamist regime in Tripoli, including Turkey, and those of warlord Khalifa Haftar in eastern Turkey along the Egyptian border.

In its article "How Europe is getting entangled in the big Middle East conflict," the Turkish website Ahval notes: "On the one hand, there is the 'revolutionary alliance' of Turkey, Qatar, the Muslim Brothers, a regional movement, and Iran. On the other hand, we see the 'status-quo entente' of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. ... France, Greece, and Cyprus support the status-quo entente, while Spain and Malta seem more ready to support the revolutionary alliance, while Italy is jaywalking between the two, depending on the file."

Riven by insoluble conflicts, the EU is apparently trying

to unify itself around the most aggressive policy against Turkey. This weekend, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian invited his German counterpart, Heiko Maas, to address a meeting of French ambassadors held to prepare France's EU presidency, which starts in 2022. Le Drian stated that France's plans "would obviously be formulated to continue and complement the German presidency."

Maas made clear that the critical question for the EU is to develop an aggressive, independent global policy amid the US war drive against China. "The United States looks at the rest of the world ever more directly through the lens of its rivalry with China," he said. "In parallel, since Trump's election, American readiness to play the role of a global power ensuring stability has fallen. We also know China is forcibly pressing its way into the geopolitical vacuum this has left behind, making facts on the ground and using methods that cannot be ours."

On Turkey, Maas added, the EU foreign ministers meeting "made very clear that its destabilizing policy in Libya and the eastern Mediterranean cannot be further tolerated. European sovereignty protects the sovereignty of all member states, including Greece and Cyprus."

Those arguing that German or European imperialism will peacefully adjudicate the Mediterranean conflicts are, however, placing heavy bets against history. Amid growing strikes and protests around the world against imperialist wars and official mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the critical question is the unification of the working class in a socialist, anti-war movement.

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