

Trade disputes further erode Turkish-US-relations

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The trade war measures signed by US President Donald Trump and disputes over oil and gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean have further enflamed the tensions between Washington and Ankara, which are already engaged militarily on opposite sides in the Kurdish regions of Syria.

Following Trump's decision to impose import tariffs of 25 percent on steel and 10 percent on aluminum, Turkey and the European Union reached an agreement to act together against the measures. According to an official statement, Turkish Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekci and EU Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström agreed in a phone call "that they should act together at the World Trade Organization in the future."

WTO Director Roberto Azevedo stated on Tuesday that the tariffs on steel and aluminum could trigger a trade war, which would not be in anybody's interest. "When we enter this road it will be very difficult to turn away. The concept of an eye for an eye can blind us and drag the world into a deep recession," he said.

Turkey's steel exports to the US were worth \$1.2 billion last year, amounting to some 10 percent of its total steel exports, while aluminum exports reached \$78.5 million. Cemil Ertem, a prominent adviser of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, wrote in the *Milliyet* daily that Ankara might retaliate tariffs on "alternative goods" such as cotton.

Further tensions have arisen, when Turkish, Greece and Cypriot media reported this week, that the Pentagon has strengthened its naval forces in the eastern Mediterranean to escort an ExxonMobil ship heading for oil and gas exploration in Cypriot waters.

The Russian news agency *Sputnik* reported that "ships from both the US Navy and Marine Corps, as well as oil surveyors from ExxonMobil, arrived in the

Mediterranean Sea. The ships' arrival comes just days after a standoff between Turkish naval vessels and Italian drillers over a disputed economic zone."

ExxonMobil's spokeswoman Suann Guthrie told the Cyprus News Agency that the acreage licensed to ExxonMobil is not contested by Turkey.

Turkish Presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin told reporters that Cyprus should carry out hydrocarbon activities with the participation of the Turkish Cypriot administration. "We have no problem with gas exploration and drilling activities in the region", he said. "But if you initiate illegal means in your exploration efforts and violate sovereign rights, there will, of course, be consequences. Turkey will never hesitate in taking the necessary steps."

Tensions between Turkey, Greek Cyprus and Greece increased last month, as the Turkish navy blocked an exploration vessel of the Italian energy company ENI off the southeastern coast of the island, known as Block 3. Ankara considers this block, among others, as part of the economic zone of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, created in the northern part of the island in 1983 and recognized only by Turkey. It stands categorically against any exploratory drilling for oil and gas off Cyprus, without approval of the Turkish Cypriots.

In an interview with the Greek daily *Kathimerini*, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu explained that increasing "the use of its domestic energy resources" is "one of the major elements of Turkish energy policy". According to Cavusoglu, "This includes the hydrocarbon resources that are potentially located in our maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is our sovereign right to search for and to exploit these resources. Therefore, we plan to launch our drilling activities in the Eastern

Mediterranean in the near future.”

Cavusoglu said it was “unacceptable that the Greek Cypriot side persists in acting as though it were the sole owner of the island. Both the Turkish Cypriots and Turkey have repeatedly stressed that unilateral exploration and exploitation activities in the Eastern Mediterranean are not legitimate in the absence of a just and lasting comprehensive settlement in Cyprus,” he added.

Egypt also got involved in the issue, after Cavusoglu described the December 2013 agreement between Egypt and Cyprus on the joint exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves in the eastern Mediterranean as “null and void.” In an official statement the Egyptian Foreign Ministry warned Ankara that “any attempts targeting or undermining Egypt’s sovereign rights in that region will be rejected and confronted.”

Turkey and Egypt had close ties under the former President Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, before he was toppled by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in a US-backed coup in July 2013. Since then, relations between Egypt and Turkey have suffered a heavy blow. Meanwhile, Egyptian-Cypriot relations have continued to develop.

Along with ExxonMobil and ENI, BP and Total are also amongst the energy giants descending on the eastern Mediterranean area in a quest for super profits that threatens to further escalate not only major disputes between regional states, but also inter-imperialist rivalries.

Meanwhile, Ankara has reiterated its calls for the US to prevent the Syrian Kurdish fighters of the People’s Protection Units’ (YPG) from traveling to the Afrin region of Syria to fight against the Turkish military and its proxy ground force, the so-called Free Syrian Army. Turkey has long been enraged at Washington’s support for the YPG, which Ankara views as a terrorist organization.

At a news conference on Tuesday, March 6, Turkey’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy accused the Pentagon’s spokesperson Col. Robert Manning of continuing “to speak nonsense”. A day earlier, the latter had said that some ground operations against the Islamic State by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the main US proxy force in Syria dominated by the YPG, had been temporarily put on hold because of Turkey’s Afrin operation.

The deployment of Kurdish forces to Afrin has also been confirmed by Maj. Adrian Rankine-Galloway, another Pentagon spokesman, who said, “Some fighters operating within the SDF have decided to leave operations in the middle Euphrates river valley to fight elsewhere, possibly in Afrin”. Previously, US Gen. Joseph Votel, head of the US Central Command, said Turkish activity in Afrin was distracting from the fight against the Islamic State.

While the Islamic State forces have largely been defeated, the Pentagon still needs the YPG to hold territory in Syria in order to assure US imperialism another base for its operations in the Middle East—a strategic aim that Washington seeks to conceal under the pretext of ensuring that the Islamist militant group does not re-emerge.



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