

Greek, Turkish warships nearly clash in Aegean over Mediterranean gas fields

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A Turkish naval expedition to escort oil-drilling vessels in the Aegean Sea off the Greek island of Kastellórizo this week nearly escalated into war between NATO allies Turkey and Greece.

This came amid mounting divisions inside the imperialist alliance over the civil war in Libya triggered by the 2011 NATO war that toppled Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's regime. Backed by France, Egypt voted to approve military deployments into Libya against Turkish-backed forces, only weeks after Turkish intelligence officers were wounded in a bombing of Libya's Watiya airbase. It is ever clearer that conflicts unleashed by decades of imperialist war in the Middle East and the Mediterranean now threaten to blow up the NATO alliance.

Turkey announced that the research vessel *Oruç Reis* would set sail Wednesday for oil exploration with a naval escort. While Turkish F-16 fighter jets were intercepted by Greek jets in Greek airspace near Kastellórizo, a group of 18 Turkish warships prepared to escort the vessel into waters that Greece claims as part of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Analyst Vassilis Nedos told the Greek conservative daily *Kathimerini* that Greek forces had also detected Turkish drones and Special Forces units operating in the area.

After 12 Turkish warships set sail with the *Oruç Reis*, the Greek government responded by placing its entire armed forces on full alert, recalling Greek Chief of Defense Staff General Konstantinos Floros from Cyprus, and preparing to dispatch a Greek flotilla against the Turkish vessels.

Greek naval officers made threatening statements to the press. "We are ready to deploy even more warships in the wider area as soon as we are given the appropriate instructions," one told the daily *Pentapostagma*. "The morale of the Fleet's teams is high. The time has come." He added that Athens was prepared to cross "the red line"

over Kastellórizo.

Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy reacted by flatly dismissing all the objections to the Turkish operation. He said, "Greece raised objections to the current survey activity and claimed that the survey area is within its own continental shelf. Greece bases this claim on the presence of remote islands far from its own mainland, most notably Kastellórizo. This maximalist continental shelf claim of Greece is contrary to international law, jurisprudence, and court decisions. ... We therefore reject these unjustified assertions of Greece."

At this point, Berlin intervened to halt an all-out military escalation in the region. German Chancellor Angela Merkel had already called Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan the day before, while German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas was visiting Athens. Merkel then telephoned Erdoğan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to avert an armed clash between the Turkish and Greek navies.

Initial reports on the talks emerged in the German newspaper *Bild*. "A situation was developing that could have led at any time to escalation between the two NATO countries," it wrote. "Then Merkel intervened." The paper added that the Turkish fleet changed course after Erdoğan took the phone call from Merkel.

German government spokeswoman Ulrike Demmer later confirmed the *Bild*'s account. She said Merkel and Erdoğan discussed "various issues, especially the situation in Libya and the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as various bilateral issues." Asked directly whether Turkish drilling was an issue, Demmer said: "I can confirm that the issue was the Eastern Mediterranean. Our position on the principle of drilling, on the issue of maritime borders and the exploitation of natural resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, is well known."

Tensions remain high, however, and the Greek military is still on alert monitoring Turkish warships in the area after the Turkish naval vessels turned away from escorting the Oruç Reis.

There was panic in Greece yesterday when many people received a text message, purporting to be from the Greek Defense Ministry, telling them to “mobilize” in response to a “military incident.” Police ultimately sent out their own mass text message instructing the public to disregard the text. Greece’s Cyber Crime Prosecution Directorate was tasked with investigating who sent the text.

Conflicting positions emerged from NATO imperialist capitals on the Greek-Turkish dispute. While French President Emmanuel Macron issued a statement declaring his solidarity with Greece and calling for sanctions on Turkey, the US State Department called on Turkish authorities “to halt any plans for operations and to avoid steps that raise tensions in the region.” However, it surprised Athens by calling the waters off Kastellórizo “disputed.”

Attending an event at the American Hellenic Institute where he attacked Turkish claims on the divided Mediterranean island of Cyprus, US Senator Robert Menendez criticized the State Department statement. He said, “Let’s be crystal clear—the only country ‘disputing’ these waters is Turkey. These waters belong to Greece, and the State Department must unequivocally and publicly recognize that Turkey alone is responsible for the tension over them.”

This further adds to tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, which has been thoroughly destabilized by the 2011 war in Libya. Divisions have grown inside NATO over which Libyan militia to support in Libya’s decade-long civil war, even as the failure of the US-led proxy war for regime change in Syria dramatically intensified geopolitical rivalry between the major world powers.

After Washington threatened but ultimately backed off going to war against Syria in 2013, a number of major powers turned to a more active or aggressive foreign policy. Germany began the re-militarization of its foreign policy, China launched its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to build infrastructure across the region, and Russia and Iran prepared to intervene directly to support the Syrian regime against US-backed militias.

Significantly, when US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Greece last year to open new military bases, he cited China and Russia as the main targets of this initiative.

The discovery of massive undersea natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has only intensified these conflicts, which increasingly threaten to escalate beyond the control of the powers involved. With France’s Total and Italy’s ENI locked in a bitter rivalry for energy resources across the region, bloody military conflicts are becoming intertwined with inter-imperialist rivalries inside NATO.

The Egyptian Parliament voted unanimously Monday to approve “the deployment of members of the Egyptian armed forces on combat missions outside Egypt’s borders to defend Egyptian national security ... against criminal armed militias and foreign terrorist elements.” Its resolution said the deployment would take place on a “western front,” which was widely taken as a reference to Egypt’s western neighbor, Libya.

This could lead to a direct clash between the Turkish and Egyptian armies. While Cairo and Paris have backed warlord Khalifa Haftar’s forces in Libya, the Erdoğan government backed by Italy has armed the rival Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. Cairo has blamed Turkey for transporting Islamist fighters from Syria to back the GNA in Libya, and French and Turkish vessels nearly fired on each other when Paris tried to search Turkish merchant ships bound for Libya. Cairo has also purchased Russian anti-ship missiles that can hit Turkish warships in the area.

The fact that Greek and Turkish warships came close to a direct clash in the Aegean this week is a warning. A century after the outbreak of World War I, the anarchy of the nation-state system again threatens to push the entire region—in the absence of the independent intervention of an anti-war movement of the working class—towards the eruption of major regional or even global conflicts.



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