

Aegean Shadows: the battle for blue gold in the Eastern Mediterranean

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The Eastern Mediterranean region, known for vast natural gas reserves and contentious maritime boundaries, is the subject of recent concerning geopolitical discourse. Interaction between Turkey,



Greece and Cyprus reveals a wider narrative of regional muscle flexing and financial gain. These three countries, each with vested interests and historical claims, boarder maritime sea channels that have direct impacts on global energy markets and diplomacy.

Background: the roots of dispute

The Eastern Mediterranean – known historically for being a hotbed of geopolitical tensions – has seen aged disputes amplify following recent discoveries of large natural gas reserves. Countries Turkey, Greece and Cyprus, each with their own claims and strategic desires, have reached a critical political intersection. The prize now is not just a matter of territorial one-upmanship, it is the potential of significant economic windfalls generated by energy resources.

These newly discovered gas reserves beneath the seabed of the Eastern Mediterranean bring both promise and provocation. Dormant historic disputes have resurfaced, with the potential of gaining energy independence and economic gain. Add the involvement of international actors and the importance of the Mediterranean shipping lanes and you now have a region that is a focal point of global interest.

Stakeholders and their interests

Turkey, Greece and Cyprus are at the forefront of the natural gas discovery disputes, all bringing their own geopolitical case and economic interests to the table. Turkey's aggressive claims fronted by its "Blue Homeland" doctrine, challenge the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) established by Greece and Cyprus, both which have the support of European Union (EU) laws in favour of their claims.

The involvement of external influence from the EU, Russia and the United States (US) is complicating talks. There is the EU in Greece and Cyprus' corner reinforcing their claims, the US balancing its own military interests while trying to maintain stability in the region, and Russia keeping a watchful eye, looking to maintain influence and seize on any opportunities to further its own security plans.

Negotiations are being shaped by alliances and opposition within the region. For example, the alliance between Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt contrasts starkly with Turkey's relatively isolated stance, which significantly influences the direction of these engagements. Such polarization exposes the challenges of these negotiations, and the greater stability and economic prospects of each country.

Key issues and current dynamics

The tensions stem largely from disagreements over the EEZs, where Turkey's maritime claims oppose those of its neighbours. A focal point in these discussions is the unresolved status of Northern Cyprus, only recognised by Turkey, complicates relations and impedes a unified approach to resource management in the region. Past years have witnessed a marked increase in naval confrontation and diplomatic discourse that have not only aggravated the situation but also given rise to potential threats to international navigation and energy security.

The legal claims hinge on the interpretations of international maritime law, in particular the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Greece and Cyprus are in alignment with the framework for UNCLOS, that allows for nations to extend their maritime boundaries up to 200 nautical miles, Turkey is yet to ratify this convention. This critical divergence is the main cause of the ongoing confrontations over the EEZs and the rights to the water's seabed resources.

The dispute also extends to the legal status of the islands and their role in determining the maritime zone boundaries. Greece believes that its islands are allowed to create their own EEZs, a position that is supported by most international precedents but refuted by Turkey, which holds the view that said entitlements should not disproportionately contravene the EEZs of mainland coastal states. This stance has led to multiple stand-offs around the Island of Kastellorizo. The island, in spite of its close proximity to Turkey, is the basis of Greece's maritime claims that stretch across the Eastern Mediterranean.

Economic implications

The tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean not only set the scene of the region's dynamics but also affect global energy markets. The gas reserves that play a poignant role in the grievances between Turkey, Greece and Cyprus also have implications for the greater energy supply network. These differences have complicated exploration and extraction efforts which have, in turn, influenced energy prices and brought further volatility into the international markets.

This disruption will necessitate a reassessment of global energy supply chains, driving up energy costs and possibly prompt European and Asian markets to diversify energy sources. Furthermore, a development of new energy corridors in the Eastern Mediterranean offers an opportunity to transform global energy politics. New routes could reduce dependence on traditional existing energy powerhouses and provide countries like Cyprus and Greece greater influence in international diplomacy and economic negotiations.

Recent events

The foreign ministers of Greece and Turkey are soon to discuss and attempt to resolve maritime boundaries and continental shelves, as part of a directive stemming from a recent meeting between Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, at the UN General Assembly.

This marks a significant development in the lengthy territorial disputes over the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean seas.

The talks are said to occur in two phases, starting with establishing a legal and procedural framework, potentially involving international judicial bodies like the International Court of Justice or the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. The second phase, beginning early 2025, will delve into more detailed negotiations concerning the precise demarcation of maritime zones. This initiative, to be considered with cautious optimism, aims at resolving the longstanding tensions in regard to the overlapping sea claims.

Conclusion

The strategic importance of the Eastern Mediterranean cannot be overlooked, with geopolitical friction directly linked to the vast natural gas reserves. Although Russia watches events closely, the US seeks to maintain peace in region and protect sea channels that service global supply chains.

Recent developments towards dialogue between Greece and Turkey are promising, however, must be viewed with caution when considering what is at stake for whichever country establishes the rights to exploit the newly found gas reserves.

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