



Turkey's Method in the Mediterranean: The hold over Northern Cyprus

Dorothee SCHMID
Yasmina DAHECH

► Key points

- On July 20, 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan celebrated with his Turkish Cypriot counterpart Ersin Tatar the 47th anniversary of the Turkish military intervention in Northern Cyprus. This ceremony marks the strategic reinvestment of the Cypriot file by Turkey.
- Located in the heart of the Levantine basin, in the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus is a re-emerging geostrategic crossroad, at the confluence of the gas issue and Euro-Turkish tensions.
- Advocating for the final division of the island, Turkey is consolidating its hold on Northern Cyprus by tightening cooperation with the current pro-Turkish administration, and through a series of territorial achievements
- The international community remains relatively passive in the face of this dynamic which illustrates the effectiveness of Turkey's post-Davutoglu foreign policy.

INTRODUCTION

On July 20, 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Turkish Cypriot counterpart Ersin Tatar celebrated together with great fanfare the 47th anniversary of "Operation Attila": the 1974 military intervention in northern Cyprus, which resulted in the occupation of 37% of the island by the Turkish military. The Turkish president's itinerary was confined to the divided capital, Nicosia (Lefkosia in Greek/Lefkoşa in Turkish); Erdoğan spoke at the northern Cypriot parliament, where he announced the construction of a new institutional complex, which will further anchor the grip of the Turkish power. Ersin Tatar was launching at his side the "second phase of the expansion plan of Varosha", a former Greek seaside resort (Maraş in Turkish) which the two men had already visited in November 2020. The Turkish president then performed the Eid al-Adha prayer at the Turkish-funded Hala Sultan Mosque, which was inaugurated in 2018, and wished that this special day in Islam would bring peace to the world.

Key dates, symbols, announcements: Tayyip Erdoğan relentlessly spreads the message of Turkish greatness with a now polished protocol. But this visit to Cyprus has a particular significance for a long-term perspective. It illustrates the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) current strategic reinvestment in the Cyprus issue after years of relative disinterest. And the president's vows of peace contrast with the accomplished facts that keep happening: after recently announcing the installation of a drone base in Geçitkale (Lefkóniko in Greek), 30 kilometers from the large north Cypriot port of Famagusta (Gazimağusa in Turkish), Ankara is once again calling for the final partition of the island.

TURKEY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: THE STORY OF A DISINHIBITION

The Cyprus issue takes on its full meaning in the context of recurrent tensions that have emerged in the Mediterranean over the past few years, where Turkish advances have taken regional powers and their traditional sponsors by surprise: the United States, France and even Russia. The eastern Mediterranean has thus seen a very tense summer of 2020, marked by a diplomatic confrontation and an exchange of martial discourses between Turkey and the European Union (EU). After the partial surprise of the Turkish military intervention in Libya, disagreements crystallized over the delimitation of maritime spaces, amidst a context of crossed gas explorations. Difficulties seemed to ease for a few months with Greece and France, engaged in a real arm wrestling with Turkey, but here is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan causing new disturbances on Cyprus, eternal subject of tensions with the EU.

What place does the Mediterranean hold in the power projects of an increasingly enterprising Turkey? Its status has changed considerably in the Turkish historical imagination. For a long time it was seen as a natural space for conquest, an "Ottoman lake" where the sultans deployed a powerful and efficient fleet. The defeat of the Empire in the first world war transformed the Mediterranean into a threatening place. After kicking the occupying troops - including the Greeks and the French - out of his territory, Atatürk established in 1923 the basis for a Republic centered on the Anatolian hinterland and temporarily renouncing its external ambitions. The Akdeniz ("white sea") was then theorized as a space of economic stagnation and cultural backwardness¹. It is a neighbourhood haunted by uncontrolled conflict, where territorial disputes persist with Greece, then Cyprus, or even Syria - since the Alexandrette/Hatay sandjak was attached to Turkey in 1939.

The Mediterranean avoidance syndrome of the Turks has been overcome by the AKP, which has reinvested the Akdeniz as a place of opportunity since the early 2000s. Guided by the Davutoğlu Doctrine, which assumes Turkey's role as a pivotal state, Ankara then begins to see the Mediterranean as a springboard to serve its ambition as a transformative power. Turkey wants to become a regional leader through soft power and challenge the balance of conventional power. Its popularity in the Arab world designated it, at the time of the "spring" of 2011, as the model for revolutionaries seeking democracy.

The multiplication of new conflicts, however, has led to the reconciliation of the Turks with hard power: Turkey militarily intervened outside its borders, several times in Syria, then in Libya, and interfered in other wars: in the fall of 2020, Turkish drones contributed to the victory of Azerbaijan against Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Thus, the Mediterranean space has become the laboratory of a Turkish foreign policy that is reviving expansionism. The popularization of the Mavi Vatan's doctrine, the "blue homeland"², which contests in the first instance the Greek and Cypriot maritime borders, definitively signals the rebirth of a conquering Turkish imaginary in the Mediterranean. A maritime delimitation agreement concluded in November 2019 with Libya, encroaching on Greek waters, has brought things full circle: Turkey will seize every opportunity to defend its place in the Mediterranean. In this context Cyprus, so close and already partly occupied, is an essential geopolitical hold.

1. J. Jabbour, « Le retour de la Turquie en Méditerranée : la « profondeur stratégique » turque en Méditerranée pré- et post-printemps arabe », *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, n° 89, 2014.

2. A. Denizau, « Mavi Vatan, la 'Patrie bleue' : Origines, influence et limites d'une doctrine ambitieuse pour la Turquie », *Études de l'Ifri*, Ifri, avril 2021.

THE STRATEGIC WEIGHT OF CYPRUS

The history of Cyprus has always been at the heart of the rivalries of empires in the Eastern Mediterranean. A commercial hub in ancient times, the island has been under several forms of tutelage, first Hellenic, then Ottoman at the end of the 16th century, and British from 1878 until its independence in 1960. After this date, the United Kingdom kept two military bases there; London also had to guarantee, along with Athens and Ankara, the constitutional balance of the island, and the "guarantors" could intervene militarily to this end. This was the legal source of Operation Attila in 1974, after years of inter-communal tensions between the Greek population of the island - at the time 80% of the original population, and the Turkish Cypriots - a significant minority of 20%. On July 20, the Turkish army intervened in northern Cyprus in response to a coup d'état by the Greek Cypriot paramilitary organization EOAKA, which threatened to annex the island to Greece. Ankara occupies - or protects, in the Turkish version of the story, 37 per cent of the divided territory. The United Nations (UN) had deployed as early as 1964 a peacekeeping force along a green line intended to separate the communities; this line now marks the limit with the area occupied by the Turkish army in the north.

The fate of Northern Cyprus has been a Turkish national issue ever since. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) declared its independence in 1983; Turkey has not been able to gain recognition for it (except briefly from Pakistan), and continues to hold at arm's length, while isolating it, what it perceives as an embryonic Turkish state outside Anatolia. The arrival of the AKP in power changed the official doctrine for a time: the new government supported the plan for the reunification of the island proposed by Kofi Annan in 2004, before the island joined the EU, at a time when Ankara was also hoping to join the Union. But the Greek Cypriots voted against reunification, which was not a condition for EU membership - and the Turks are now constantly pointing out this point, considered a historical mistake by the Europeans. The resulting legal imbroglio constantly weighs on EU-Turkey relations, as Turkey does not recognize the existence of the Greek Republic of Cyprus, which has become a full member of the EU. The Republic of Cyprus, often in tandem with Greece, has since then played the role of a watchdog over Turkey in the EU, watching for the slightest change in Turkey's strategic position. The AKP's return to the two-state doctrine also symbolizes the state of current tensions with the Europeans. The situation in Cyprus has been on the agenda of the foreign affairs councils in Brussels for the past two years, and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, repeats that the two-state solution will never be accepted.

The dispute now includes new elements. The vast gas discoveries in the Levantine basin since 2009, including the Aphrodite field in Cypriot waters in 2011, have changed the situation. The riparian countries are rushing to define their exclusive economic zone (EEZ) to be able to exploit the natural resources. Cyprus, an island, a crossroads in this new gas game, must deal with its many neighbors: Egypt to the south, Israel and the Gaza Strip to the southeast, Lebanon to the east, Syria to the northeast, Turkey to the north and Greece to the northwest. The 1982 Montego Bay Convention sets out precise delimitation rules for maritime territories, but Turkey, a non-signatory, does not consider itself bound by standards that on paper benefit Greece. Even more complex is the fact that the Turks, who are the only ones to recognize the TRNC as independent, claim a full EEZ for it.

The conflicts that have been multiplying around the Mediterranean since 2011 also raise the strategic value of the Cypriot territory. The United Kingdom still has two military bases there, whose importance is growing: Akrotiri (Royal Air Force) and Dhekalia (Royal Navy) are used to support the deployment of British and American troops in the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan). They also host listening stations as part of the Echelon network, which covers the eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Balkans. Turkey has announced that it is now studying the possibility of opening Turkish bases in the north of Cyprus, which would face the British bases. The Turkish announcements in this sense leave the allies perplexed, against a background of persistent tug-of-war within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The migration crisis linked to the Syrian conflict is also increasing Turkish pressure: the Greek Cypriot Republic is now experiencing an influx of refugees from Turkey, who are transiting through the north of the island. Incidents are multiplying on the green line, on land and at sea.

THE DYNAMICS OF TURKISH CONTROL IN NORTHERN CYPRUS

The failure of the last inter-Cypriot talks, at the informal UN 5+1 conference in Geneva in April 2021, has added fuel to Turkey's fire: Ankara is calling for lessons to be learned from the international community's impotence, and for any plans for a confederation for the island to be abandoned. While the COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the atmosphere of mistrust between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities, Turkey's position is gradually becoming clearer in terms of both announcements and facts: it is now a matter of consolidating an independent Cypriot entity in the north, and strengthening its alliance with Turkey.

The incumbent president of the TRNC, Mustafa Akinci, claims to have been pressured by Turkey during the presidential election won in October 2020 by his rival Ersin Tatar. The effects of Erdoğan's sponsorship for Tatar remain debated, but the election of this pro-AKP, open supporter of the alliance with Turkey, is accelerating the warming of relations. The TRNC's dependence on Turkey is already glaringly obvious economically. The demographic dynamics of Northern Cyprus are also dependent on the settlement of Turkish colonists. The territorial dynamics of Turkish control can be observed in several places.

The fate of Varosha/Maraş, a town in the Famagusta agglomeration formerly inhabited by Greek Cypriots forced into exile, and closed since the war by the Turkish government, is now at the center of intense tensions. By allowing its partial and gradual reopening since 2019, Turkey seems determined to fix on the ground the division of the island, to the benefit of Turkish Cypriots. Recent announcements show the intention to put Varosha back into service to make it an engine of tourism in Northern Cyprus, in an economic development plan under Turkish perfusion. The renovation of the roads and the use of the resort's parking lots already show an increase in the frequency of visits, which attests to a gradual resumption of activities.

The renovation of roads in Varosha/Maraş



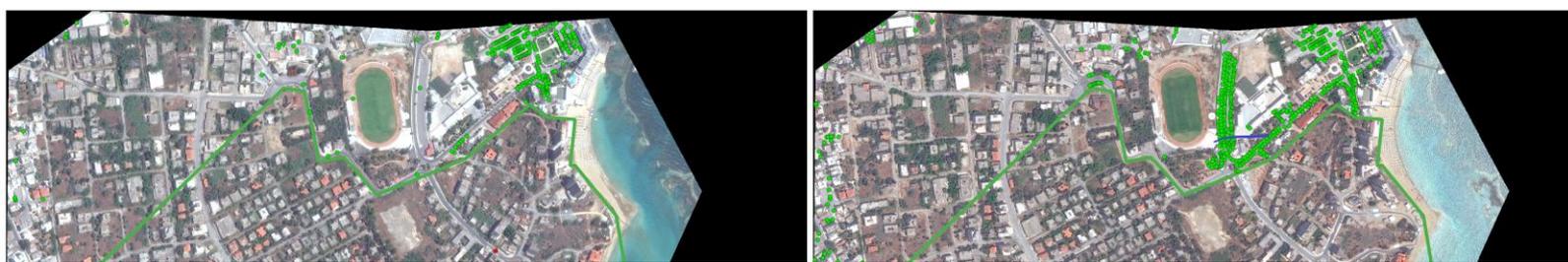
June 2019



June 2021

Source: Maxar. Satellite images provided by Preligens in partnership with Ifri

Evolution of the use of parking lots in Varosha/Maraş



June 2019

June 2021 : in green on the image, Preligens' algorithm identified vehicles on the car park

Source: Maxar. Satellite images provided by Preligens in partnership with Ifri

The concomitant installation of a drone base in Geçitkale marks another milestone in the assertion of a Turkish territorial hold in Northern Cyprus. Tayyip Erdoğan was supposed to officially inaugurate it during his visit but the event was postponed for some unknown reason. However, traces of such a settlement are already visible on the ground. On what still looks like a field airfield, drones of the Bayraktar TB2 model, touted by the Turks as the "best robot plane in the world," are to be deployed in the future. For the moment, Geçitkale is summarily equipped with a hangar, drones operating containers, and a few drones randomly present on the runway. The final use of the base is still rather mysterious. The official discourse refers to observation drones intended to accompany Turkish gas exploration vessels, but their stationing in Cyprus obviously widens the possible surveillance area for Turkey. And above all, these drones, when armed, constitute the most prominent equipment of the Turkish army today. Their proven effectiveness in the Syrian and Libyan theaters, as well as in Karabagh, including against the Russian Pantsir, has made them the symbol of the revival of Turkish military power - and of the technical competitiveness of a defense industry that is progressing very rapidly. The ambivalence concerning the vocation of Geçitkale is therefore worrying Turkey's neighbors, especially as in the long term the Turkish press mentions the possibility of making it a real air base capable of receiving F-16s - without prior consultation with NATO.

Evolution of the Turkish presence in Geçitkale



July 2019



December 2019



May 2021

Source: Maxar. Satellite images provided by Preligens in partnership with Ifri

Finally, the hypothesis of the installation of a Turkish naval base in Northern Cyprus has resurfaced regularly since 2018. After Russian maneuvers in the Mediterranean, retired Turkish admirals at the time spoke about the vital importance of establishing a naval base in the TRNC; a project for a "logistical port" to meet the needs of Turkish warships operating in the eastern Mediterranean was presented in June 2019. While Turkish experts have visited Northern Cyprus to examine in situ the various possibilities for developing such infrastructure (in Famagusta/Gazimağusa and in Iskele, a disused former base that is currently silted up), for the moment there is no trace of concrete progress in this direction. Nevertheless, one can observe the common presence, in the port of Famagusta/Gazimağusa, of Turkish Kılıç-class fast attack ships.

Common presence of Turkish vessels in Famagusta/Gazimağusa



March 2019



February 2020



May 2021

Turkish "Kılıç-class" fast attack ships observed in Famagusta.

Source: Maxar. Satellite images provided by Preligens in partnership with Ifri

These signals of an increased Turkish presence in northern Cyprus are of serious concern to Greek Cypriots. On July 16, 2021, firing from a Turkish ship at Cypriot coastguards on patrol was recorded near the port of Kato Pyrgos. Turkey denied the facts. Such incidents maintain a climate of high tension on the island itself, but Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's determination also worries third-party powers.

INTERNATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

In this highly inflammatory context, the Turkish president's visit seems to have been managed in a rather low-profile manner: no announcements of new gas discoveries, no untimely visits to controversial sites, a drone base awaiting inauguration. But the statements about the new presidential palace and the further opening of Varosha have irritated the international community, because they consolidate the two-state option as an accomplished fact.

The Cyprus issue has been followed by the UN for more than 50 years, and Tayyip Erdoğan's visit coincided precisely with the renewal of the mandate of the peacekeeping force present in Cyprus since 1964. The Cypriot representation alerted the UN in advance about the fate of Varosha, referring to an "attempt at colonization," and Cypriot diplomacy has been talking in recent weeks with all members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to anticipate a new crisis.

All five permanent members of the UNSC are in principle opposed to the two-state solution. The type of bilateral relations they have with Turkey, however, introduces nuances. France remains firm in the face of Erdoğan's ambitions and sees the Cyprus issue as a new declination of its imperialist aims; holding the presidency of the UNSC in July, it considers it natural that the issue should "go up" to the UN. The United States, for its part, has recently shown its willingness to reintegrate Turkey fully into the Atlantic community, and the Biden administration is struggling to find points of agreement; the Turkish army's securing of Kabul airport after the withdrawal of American troops is an example of the strategic cooperation hoped for in the future. Eager to preserve the controversial presence of their military bases in Cyprus, the British are aligning themselves with the Americans to ease tensions within NATO, even offering their good offices to reconcile the Turks and the Europeans; moreover, since Brexit they have been cultivating their special relationship with Turkey, playing on a supposed similarity of situation to the EU. Russia, which has forged a backhanded alliance with Turkey in Syria, but which is encountering difficulties in other areas (Libya, Karabagh, Ukraine), is adopting a more transactional approach than before, depending on the issue, and Cyprus is not among its priorities. Finally, China, which is not involved at this stage, refuses to take sides in the absence of a proven crisis.

The EU has expressed its anger at Turkey's announcements, but the arsenal of available sanctions is small, its use is subject to unanimity, and the silent majority of European heads of government have so far avoided confrontation. Committed to defending the sovereignty of Cyprus, which is perceived as a threatened European border, Greece and France are generally in the front line.

Athens is intensifying its cooperation in the field of security, but Cyprus is also calling on France in response to Turkish provocations: the Ministry of Defence and the Cypriot National Guard have announced their intention to acquire a French anti-drone system. Greece and France are therefore also acting according to their national interests, in a new "great game" where the British position is at this stage difficult to decipher.

Beyond forcing the two states, the prospect of the installation of permanent Turkish bases in Northern Cyprus would indeed call into question the regional strategic balance. Neighbouring powers are also concerned: Israel and Egypt, which have very tense relations with Turkey, do not look kindly on the strengthening of its military presence in Cyprus. The gas issue persists, with Russian and Israeli companies involved in exploration projects in Cyprus. A French seismic research vessel is currently on a mission in Greek waters.

CONCLUSION: THE PROGRESS OF THE TURKISH APPROACH

The Cyprus issue is a perfect illustration of the new effectiveness of a post-Davutoğlu Turkish foreign policy. After the trauma of the 2016 coup, which anchored a lasting distrust of allies, Erdoğan is accelerating Turkey's empowerment process. His toolbox now combines the achievements of soft power - economic and cultural cooperation - and the threat of hard power - anchoring military presence and consolidating a projection capability. He articulates in a well-rehearsed dialectic thundering announcements (during his visit to Cyprus a "message of determination" was to be "sent to the whole world") and accomplished facts, sometimes small but big for future developments. By duplicating existing equipment, it is also acquiring the means necessary to exercise power alone. Between the multiplication of military bases outside its borders and the project of doubling the Bosphorus by Istanbul's Kanal, Turkey continues to disengage from its past partnerships, while maintaining ambiguity about its future intentions: cooperation or confrontation?

Dorothee Schmid is a researcher and head of Ifri's Turkey/Middle East Program.
Yasmina Dahech is a research assistant for Ifri's Turkey/Middle East Program.

Dorothee Schmid and Yasmina Dahech would like to thank Elisa Domingues Dos Santos for her expert review.

Comment citer cette publication :

Dorothee Schmid et Yasmina Dahech « La méthode turque en Méditerranée : l'emprise sur Chypre-Nord », *Briefings de l'Ifri*, Ifri, 21 juillet 2021.

ISBN : 979-10-373-0391-2

Les opinions exprimées dans ce texte n'engagent que la responsabilité de l'auteur.

© Tous droits réservés, Ifri, 2021

Couverture : © Shutterstock/The Road Provides



27 rue de la Procession
75740 Paris cedex 15 – France

Ifri.org

