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# Turkey's interventions in its near abroad: The case of northern Cyprus

The primary objective of Ankara's recent political and military interventions in northern Cyprus is to use the island as the linchpin for its maritime ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean in terms of the geo-economics of claiming and exploring the hydrocarbon resources around the island and expanding its naval power more broadly. Turkey recently upgraded the military utility of the island in line with its *Blue Homeland* naval doctrine as one track towards realising its primary objective. Another track consists of Ankara politically empowering Turkish Cypriots who advocate for a two-state solution. In doing so, Turkey aims to maintain the status quo, which it views as a 'two-states-on-one-island' situation that brings northern Cyprus under increasing Turkish control and pulls it out of the EU's orbit. In the process, it suppresses the views of advocates of re-unification in northern Cyprus. The EU also stands to lose as the prospect of settling the Cyprus question via a bi-zonal and bi-communal federation – its preferred option – fades from sight.

## 1 Introduction

The future political status of Cyprus hit the headlines once more in July 2021 when Turkish President Erdoğan and Turkish Cypriot Prime Minister Ersin Tatar announced the intention to 're-purpose' the ghost town Varosha (Maraş) back to its original function as a tourist destination.<sup>1</sup> Varosha, once home to luxury hotels and large-scale tourism, became a Turkish military zone following Ankara's 1974 intervention. The unilateral announcement triggered strong and negative reactions from Greek Cypriots and the EU because its re-zoning from military usage to

tourism will put pressure on Greek Cypriots to sell their property titles to Turkish Cypriots, thus creating new frictions. Interestingly, the 're-purposing' of Varosha also triggered discussions in Turkish Cyprus because local opposition parties viewed it as a move to influence the upcoming elections in favour of the local right-wing National Unity Party (UBP) that traditionally supports Ankara's guardianship of northern Cyprus.

The announcement reflects the ongoing shift in the Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s position following the failure of the 2004 Annan plan. It has since moved from resolving the Cyprus issue via cooperation with the EU to pursuing a more unilateral approach to bring northern Cyprus under more direct Turkish control as a quasi-protectorate.

<sup>1</sup> Hacıoğlu, Hilmi, Erdoğan'ın Asıl Sürprizi Maraş Açılımı Oldu, *VOA Türkiye*, 20 July 2021, [online](#) (accessed 17 January 2022).

**Box 1 A short introduction to the Cyprus question**

The Republic of Cyprus (RoC) was established in 1960 under the guarantorship of Turkey, Greece and Britain. Its political order was short-lived despite being based on the balance of power between Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities. After its foundation, the RoC witnessed intercommunal infighting, a coup d'état by the military junta in Greece (1974), a subsequent Turkish military intervention in response (also 1974) and the creation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) (1983). Ankara's first military intervention (1974) was considered legal as it was a response to a Greek coup on the island and in line with Turkey's status as guarantor state. Its second intervention and the establishment of the TRNC (1983) were not. In fact, instead of re-asserting the previously agreed settlement of 1960, these moves created a new situation. UN-led attempts to re-unite the island based on a bizonal and bicomunal federation have since been unsuccessful. The accession of Greek Cyprus to the European Union (EU) in 2004 – before resolving the island's division – introduced a new geopolitical dynamic in favour of Greek Cypriots.

Today, the population of Cyprus is 1,219,977, of which 382,000 are Turkish Cypriots (31%) and 837,977 Greek Cypriots (69%). Of the Turkish Cypriots, roughly half are Turkish settlers who made northern Cyprus their home after the 1974 invasion and roughly half are indigenous Turkish Cypriots. The island's main Turkish Cypriot urban centres are Nicosia (Lefkoşa), Famagusta (Gazimağosa) and Morphou (Güzelyurt). Key Greek Cypriot centres include Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca and Paphos.

Source: World Population Review, [online](#) and KKTC'nin nüfusu açıklandı: 382 bin 230, [Sözcü](#), 6 January 2021, [online](#).

In other words, a two-states-on-one-island rather than a federal solution. Factors explaining this shift include the discovery of hydrocarbon reserves<sup>2</sup> around the island and its increasing geopolitical utility in the context of Turkey's more assertive foreign/security policy over the past few years that has included the Mediterranean area.

In this context, the brief examines Ankara's current designs on northern Cyprus, the strategic drivers that underpin its actions, and the means as well as results of its intervention in the political, military and political-economic domains. It is part of a series examining Turkish interventions in its near abroad, with the aim of developing a bottom-up understanding of Turkey's strategic rationale for its various enterprises in the neighbourhood, their sustainability as

well as their ramifications for the EU and its Member States.<sup>3</sup>

**2 Ankara's strategic rationale for greater intervention in northern Cyprus**

In recent years, Ankara's Cyprus policy has undergone a significant shift from an inclination towards a federalist solution to one favouring a two-states-on-one-island solution. This shift reflects Ankara's growing interventionism in Turkish Cypriot internal politics. Symbolically, President Erdoğan even decided to gift a new office / residential complex to the Presidency of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) to

2 Hydrocarbons include gas, oil, coal and liquified petroleum gas (LPG).

3 I would like to thank several Cyprus experts for an insightful focus group discussion on 3 December 2021 on recent developments. I am also grateful to Hasan Selim Özertem (political analyst) and Erwin van Veen (Clingendael) for their review of the brief.

underline its status and linkage with Turkey, mimicking his own presidential compound.<sup>4</sup>

The core driver behind this shift is the discovery of significant hydrocarbon deposits around the island in the early 2010s, which significantly elevated its geo-economic relevance for Ankara. It also created a new set of disputes with Athens and the Greek Cypriot Administration (GCA), on top of the already existing maritime disputes between Greece and Turkey. These disputes result from the clash between Greek claims to full exclusive economic zone and continental shelf entitlements for islands situated in the Aegean Sea across the median line between Greece and Turkey as well as for Cyprus, and Turkey's claim that such entitlements should be restricted to territorial sea zones.<sup>5</sup> Also, Turkey does not recognise the GCA as being in a position to object to its hydrocarbon activities around Cyprus on the grounds that it is not the sole representative of the island.<sup>6</sup> Because Turkey is not a signatory to the UN Convention of the Law of Sea (UNCLOS), the prospects for a negotiated solution are slim.

An ancillary driver of this shift is Turkey's new naval concept *Blue Homeland*<sup>7</sup> (*Mavi Vatan*, 2006), which considers maritime jurisdiction zones through the lenses of absolute sovereignty underpinned by realist

power projection.<sup>8</sup> Originally designed to offset Greece's maximalist demands in the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea in 2006 by Rear Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, the Blue Homeland concept mostly serves as a rebuttal of the notion that full exclusive economic zone and continental shelf entitlements are applicable to all Greek islands and Cyprus.<sup>9</sup> The Blue Homeland concept also employs the principle of forward defence to enforce Ankara's maritime claims, upgrade Turkey's status as a maritime power and deter any possible Western counter moves. Viewed through a Blue Homeland lens, northern Cyprus has appreciably geopolitical significance due to its location, which enables power projection deep into the eastern Mediterranean as a kind of 'natural aircraft carrier'.<sup>10</sup>

Both drivers reinforce one another in the sense that Turkey uses its maritime claims on territorial waters and hydrocarbon resources to upgrade its military presence, while its military presence in the context of Blue Homeland is used to strengthen its hydrocarbon claims (for example, since 2019 the Turkish Navy has performed its annual drills under a Blue Homeland flag). Combined, they have turned Cyprus into the epicentre of geostrategic and geo-economic rivalry between Turkey and Greece (see Figure 1) – and, to a lesser extent, the EU.<sup>11</sup>

4 Erdoğan Kuzey Kıbrıs'ta 'müjdeyi' verdi: Cumhurbaşkanlığı Sarayı ve Millet Bahçesi yapılacak, *Euronews*. 20 July 2021, [online](#).

5 Açıkgönül, Y. Emre, *Turkey's East Med policy: Victory at home, isolation abroad*, Istanbul: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, September 2020; Schultheiss, Christian, *Charting a peaceful course for the eastern Mediterranean Sea Disputes*, European Leadership Network, 21 May 2021, [online](#).

6 Letter dated 18 March 2020 from the Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General, [online](#).

7 Yaycı, Cihat, *Türkiye-Libya Arasında İmzalanana Münhasır Ekonomik Bölge Andlaşmasının Sonuç ve Etkileri*, *Kriter* 4:42, January 2020; Gingeras, Ryan, *Blue Homeland: The Heated Politics Behind Turkey's New Maritime Strategy*, *War on the Rocks*, June 2020; Jager, Jeff and Norris, Andrew, *The Mavi Vatan Doctrine and Blue Homeland Anthem: A Look At Turkey's Maritime Worldview*, CIMSEC, September 2021.

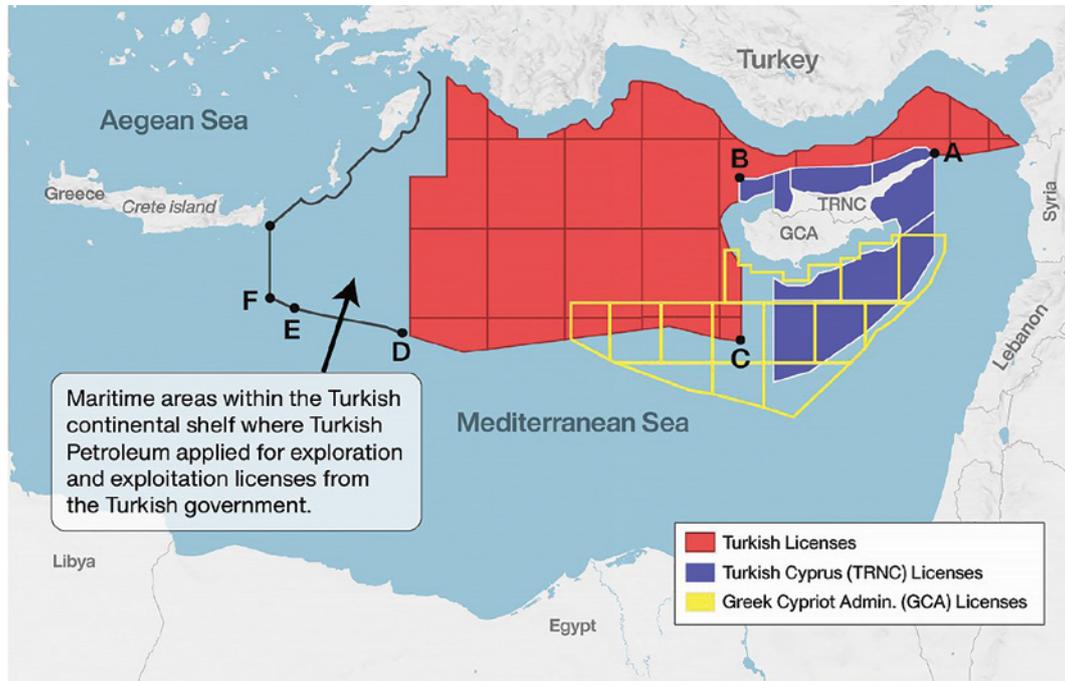
8 Yalçınalp, E. And Temel, E., *Mavi Vatan nasıl doğdu? Doktrinin mimarları Cem Gürdeniz ve Cihat Yaycı anlatıyor*, *BBC Türkçe*, 10 September 2020 [online](#) (accessed 12 December 2021).

9 Denizeau, Aurélien, *Mavi Vatan: the "Blue Homeland" - The Origins, Influences and Limits of Ambitious Doctrine for Turkey*, IFRI, April 2021. According to its proponents, the purpose of the Blue Homeland concept is to expand Turkey's EEZ from 41.000 to 189.000 km<sup>2</sup> in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean sea by declaring all maps proposed by the EU and international community null and void. See: <https://www.sde.org.tr/toplantı/türkiye-libya-deniz-mutabakatının-fikir-babası-tumamiral-dr-cihat-yaycı-sdede-konustu-faaliyeti-14295> (accessed 2 May 2022).

10 Kıbrıs Doğu Akdeniz'de Stratejik Bir Uçak Gemisi, Kıbrıs Amerikan Üniversitesi [online](#) (accessed 12 December 2021).

11 Based on an interview with Erol Kaymak, Professor of International Relations at the eastern Mediterranean University in the TRNC.

**Figure 1** Overlapping licence areas around Cyprus



Source <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/news-analysis/regional-concerns-playing-eu-against-turkey-behind-greeces-growing-hostile-approach> (accessed 16 April 2022).

These drivers have also had a profound impact on the prospects for resolution of the Cyprus question and the nature of Turkish engagement with the TRNC. Turkey traditionally advocated for a solution based on an equal partnership between Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, underpinned by guarantor roles for Turkey and Greece as the two ‘motherlands’.<sup>12</sup> It is for this reason that Ankara rejects international recognition of the Greek Cypriot regime as the government of all of Cyprus and objects to the UN’s refusal to recognise the TRNC.<sup>13</sup> It follows from this position that Turkey has traditionally leaned towards a confederal solution. Yet, when the AKP came to power in 2002, it set this policy orientation aside and instead pursued a federal settlement.<sup>14</sup>

Turkey supported the Annan plan (2004) that proposed a bizonal and bicommunal federal republic based on the Swiss model. But Greek Cypriots opposed it based on the assumption that EU accession (also in 2004) would improve their negotiating position, given that at the time Turkey aspired to join the EU at a later stage.<sup>15</sup> This turned out to be a miscalculation due to Turkey’s gradual turn away from the EU that reduced the latter’s leverage, the discovery of hydrocarbon resources that upped the stakes, and the nationalist turn in Ankara’s foreign policy after 2011 (the Arab Uprisings) and 2015 (the AKP’s alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)).

12 Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Cyprus issue, [online](#) (accessed 30 November 2021); Lindsay, J.K., *The Cyprus Problem: What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. p. 78–79.  
 13 *Ibid.*  
 14 Özertem, H., *Back to ‘the Tradition’: Turkey’s Changing Position from a Federal to a Two-State Solution to the Cyprus Conflict*, Paris: Ifri, July 2021.

15 Lindsay, J.K., *The Cyprus Problem: What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; Kaymak, E. and Tziarras, Z., *Revisiting The Cyprus Conundrum in Turkey-EU Relations*, Berlin: CATS SWP, October 2021; United Nations, Cyprus misses ‘historic chance’ as it rejects UN reunification plan, Annan says, 24 April 2004, [online](#) (accessed 17 January 2022).

**Figure 2** The current political-administrative division of Cyprus



Source: Lindsay, *op. cit.*

Ankara’s policy towards Cyprus shifted especially after the failure of the 2017 Crans Montana Summit and settled on a two-state solution as its desired outcome.<sup>16</sup> Today, while some Greek Cypriots advocate for a unitary state, the Greek Cypriot administration continues to favour a solution based on federalism. In contrast, Turkish Cypriots prefer either confederation or partition. It is a classic case of both sides pursuing maximalist policies.<sup>17</sup> However, a two-state solution may not be Ankara’s true goal. As professor Erol Kaymak highlighted: “To date, we see scant evidence of a Turkish campaign to upgrade the TRNC’s international standing. In fact, we still see

engagement with the UN through proxy talks, including informal summits.”<sup>18</sup> As a result, Turkey might still settle for a (con)federal model at some point in the future. However, it also keeps the option open to incorporate the TRNC more firmly into Turkey itself.

### 3 The means of Turkey’s intervention

Turkey has pursued its strategic objectives in northern Cyprus – geo-economics in the form of hydrocarbon resources and geopolitics by having the island serve as ‘aircraft carrier’ – by political, military and economic means. Its policy tools have in common that they all deepen Ankara’s involvement in the governance of the TRNC.

16 “Mitsotakis, Anastasiadis Coordinate Actions in View of Geneva Meeting”, in-Cyprus, April 21, 2021, available at: [in-cyprus.philenews.com](http://in-cyprus.philenews.com); Özertem, *op. cit.* 7; Uslu, S., Ekinci, A., Aynur, Tosun, M. and A. Mümin, Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Artık iki devletli çözümden başka Kıbrıs’ta çıkış yolu kalmamıştır, *Anadolu Agency*, 10 February 2021 [online](#) (accessed 1 December 2021).

17 Lindsay, *op. cit.* 109.

18 Interview with Erol Kaymak, Professor of international relations at the eastern Mediterranean University in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, 3 December 2021.

In the political sphere, Ankara has significantly increased its involvement in Turkish Cypriot domestic politics. For example, when Mustafa Akıncı (former president of the TRNC) continued to prefer a federal settlement after the Crans Montana summit, in line with the popular preference of Turkish Cypriots,<sup>19</sup> Ankara first treated Mr Akıncı and his followers as *persona non grata* and subsequently intervened in the October 2020 TRNC presidential elections by supporting the right-wing National Unity Party (UBP) candidate Ersin Tatar.<sup>20</sup> This party is in favour of a two-state solution.<sup>21</sup> Its competitors – especially Mustafa Akıncı and Serdar Denktaş – and their families reportedly received threats from the Turkish National Intelligence Agency, and have been the targets of a smear campaign in both Turkish and TRNC media.<sup>22</sup> AKP Energy Minister Hasan Taçoy and Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, as well as Turkey's vice-president Fuat Oktay, were also directly involved in Ersin Tatar's election campaign in the TRNC. It should be noted that Ankara's involvement in the TRNC is grounded in a deeper layer of control as parts of the constitution of northern Cyprus have been suspended since its creation, which grants Turkey powers of direct and indirect interventions. For example, the head

of the security forces of northern Cyprus is appointed directly by Ankara.<sup>23</sup>

In the military sphere, Ankara upgraded the Geçitkale airbase in northern Cyprus to enable armed drone sorties in late 2019. This upgrade happened in parallel with the increase of Turkey's military footprint in Libya and the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>24</sup> Geçitkale hosts a permanent wing of armed drones and their command control units that facilitate and escort Ankara's seismic exploration, perform intelligence gathering and provide combat air support for nearby Turkish troops.<sup>25</sup> Ankara has also signalled its intent to build a naval base next to the drone base in Magosa (Famagusta) (the next nearest naval base lies 600km to the northwest).<sup>26</sup> These modifications come on top of the 30–40,000 Turkish troops already stationed in northern Cyprus in the form of the Cyprus Turkish Peace Force Command (two mechanised divisions, one armoured brigade and two special force regiments). In contrast, the number of Greek troops on the island is estimated to be around 1,000, while the UK maintains two sovereign base areas with about 3,500 troops.

Economically, given its political isolation and the economic embargos it faces, the TRNC depends largely on Turkey for its public finances. This is organised in the form of transfers under the Turkish-TRNC Economic and Monetary Cooperation scheme, which amounted to US\$336,83 million in 2021.<sup>27</sup> The main alternative sources of economic activity are tourism from mainland Turkey, a flourishing casino and banking sector

19 See for example this recent survey: Loizides, N. et al., *Cypriot Public Opinion Remains Open to Reunification, Survey Reveals*, London: LSE, 2022, [online](#).

20 Interview with Erol Kaymak, 3 December 2021. Note that while Mustafa Akıncı (a known advocate of a federal solution) obtained 60% of the vote during the 2015 presidential elections, Ersin Tatar (a known advocate of a two-state solution) obtained 51% of the vote during the 2020 presidential elections. This reflects both Turkey's greater level of political involvement in northern Cyprus politics and also suggests a gradual shift in public opinion away from federation. See also this T24 article of 12 October 2021, [online](#) (accessed 10 April 2021).

21 Yücel, M., Korkmazhan, A., Erönen, O., Atlı, M., Beyatlı, D., *2020 KKTC Cumhurbaşkanlığı Seçimi Hakkında Müdahale Raporu, (A Report on Intervention during TRNC's 2020 Presidential Elections)*, Bugunkıbrıs.com, 10 June 2021, [online](#) (accessed 8 December 2021)

22 *Ibid.* p. 5-6.

23 Interview with Erol Kaymak, Professor of international relations at the eastern Mediterranean University in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, 3 December 2021.

24 Kuzey Kıbrıs'a Türkiye'den İHA ve SİHA'lar gönderildi, *BBC Türkçe*, 15 December 2019, [online](#) (accessed 12 December 2021).

25 Erandaç, Bülent, *KKTC - Geçitkale İHA Türk Üssü'nün Anlamı*, Ankara: Institute of Strategic Thinking, June 2021, [online](#) (accessed 13 December 2021).

26 Gazimağusa'da Deniz Üssü Kurulması gündemde, *Kıbrısgerçek.com*, 25 December 2019, [online](#) (accessed 13 December 2021).

27 Özertem, *op. cit.* 12.

(enabled by poor regulation and the 1998 prohibition of casinos in mainland Turkey) and organised crime (including the Turkish criminal underworld).<sup>28</sup> For example, the online ‘confessions’ of Sedat Peker – a Turkish mafia boss – allege longstanding connections between organised crime networks in northern Cyprus and Turkish deep state elements that use the TRNC’s lack of international statehood and its financial non-compliance to launder money and carry out illicit business.<sup>29</sup>

In recent years, such connections appear to have grown closer with Turkish state-linked criminal figures becoming more prominent in the TRNC’s underworld.<sup>30</sup> For example, leading ultra-nationalist mafia figures such as Alaattin Çakıcı and Kürşat Yılmaz were allowed to headquarter themselves in northern Cyprus after being released from prison.<sup>31</sup> Their job seems to be to ‘regulate’ and reorganise organised crime in favour of Ankara’s political agenda.<sup>32</sup> Such groups tend to originate from the Turkish Resistance Organisation (TMT) of the 1970s, which itself was a response to the threat posed by the

main Greek paramilitary organisation of the time (Ethniki Organosis Kiprion Agoniston, or EOKA). The Financial Action Task Force (FATF)’s recent decision to put Turkey on its grey list is another indicator of the TRNC authorities’ poor ability to counter money laundering and terrorist financing.<sup>33</sup>

## 4 On results and consequences

The failure of the Annan plan in 2004 and the accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the EU paralysed both EU and UN efforts to normalise relations between the Republic of Cyprus and Turkey. It also created a frozen and semi-hostile environment in which Turkey’s non-recognition of the Republic of Cyprus as representative of the entire island, the Republic of Cyprus’ signing of EEZ agreements with Egypt (2003), Lebanon (2007) and Israel (2010), and Turkey’s delimitation of a maritime jurisdiction agreement with the TRNC in 2011 could create a more vicious cycle of mistrust and recrimination.<sup>34</sup>

Turkey’s new military deployments in northern Cyprus serve to underline Ankara’s geopolitical and geo-economic ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean. For example, a new armed drone base has extended Ankara’s surveillance, close air support (for maritime vessels) and overall deterrence capabilities by a range of 150km beyond the borders of the TRNC.<sup>35</sup> This development operationalises Ankara’s conceptualisation of military force deployment as a viable means to attain policy objectives (ref. *Blue Homeland*). It also facilitates occasional ‘crises’, especially between Turkish and Greek naval vessels in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>36</sup>

28 United States Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report Volume 2: Money Laundering, March 2021, p. 86 [online](#) (accessed 13 December 2021). Based on an interview with Cüneyt Gürer who is a Professor of Transnational Security Studies at George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.

29 Mafia leader’s brother implicates state actors in 1996 murder of Turkish Cypriot journalist, *Duvar English*, 25 May 2021, [online](#); Peker, Sedat, 23 May 2021, [online](#) (accessed 13 December 2021).

30 According to Global Organized Crime Index ([online](#)) there is ample evidence linking high-level politicians to the criminal activity in Turkey. It is also further suggested that criminal means and actors have been used by the Turkish state for external political objectives. See also: Mckernan, Bethan, *Mafia Boss’s YouTube Claims rattle Turkish Government*, The Guardian, 25 May 2021

31 Peker’in açıklamalarının ardından Çakıcı, Kıbrıs’a gitti, *Cumhuriyet*, 15 June 2021, [online](#) (accessed 13 December 2021)

32 See also: Global Organised Crime Index Turkey, [online](#) and Alaattin Çakıcı’nın “bir süre” KKTC’de yaşayacağı iddia edildi, Kıbrıspostası, 15 June 2021, [online](#).

33 Jurisdictions under Increased Monitoring, Financial Action Task Force, [online](#), October 2021, [online](#).

34 ‘Kıta Sahanlığı Anlaşması’ imzalandı, Al Jazeera Türk, September 2011, [online](#) (accessed 1 December 2021).

35 Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan’dan KKTC’deki İHA üssü için açıklama, *Savunmatr*, 20 May 2021, [online](#) (accessed 12 December 2021).

36 Göksedef, Ece, *Doğu Akdeniz: Oruç Reis ve NAVTEX’ler, Türkiye-Yunanistan gerginliğinde nasıl rol oynadı?*, BBC Türkçe, 13 October 2020, [online](#) (accessed 7 February 2022)

In brief, Turkey's military deployments are at the same time the cause and consequence of tense relations between the area's key stakeholders. So far, German and US diplomacy has prevented further escalation, but the risk continues to linger.<sup>37</sup>

Since the 2017 Crans Montana summit, UN insistence on a single state in which sovereignty originates equally from both communities contrasts with Ankara's two-states-on-one-island preference.<sup>38</sup> Even though the EU has sought to maintain a positive EU-Turkey agenda, including a promise to revise the Customs Union in March 2021, it is conditional on Ankara making constructive steps on Cyprus and broader resolution of eastern Mediterranean issues.<sup>39</sup> Due to Ankara's turn away from EU membership, it is unlikely that this agenda can progress in the near future. Instead, incidents like the May 2019 drilling carried out by the Turkish ships *Fatih* and *Yavuz* (Ottoman sultans) in disputed areas around the island have elicited strong and negative reactions from Greek Cypriots, Greece, the EU and Israel.<sup>40</sup> In spite of this, bilateral and multilateral talks to explore the potential of further negotiations continued into 2021.<sup>41</sup>

In the meantime, the demography of the TRNC and its political preferences have slowly shifted as a result of Turkish interventions. Generally speaking, Turkey's political preferences align well with those of the Turkish settlers who made northern Cyprus their home after the 1974 invasion (about half the TRNC's population), but

less well with indigenous Turkish Cypriots. Turkish settlers mostly desire a strong relationship with their motherland that emphasises shared Turkism. By way of contrast, the identity and preferences of Turkish Cypriots are more firmly anchored in their relationship with the entire island. In consequence, only one-third of Turkish settlers back a bi-communal and bi-zonal federation as a viable solution compared with three-quarters of indigenous Turkish Cypriots.<sup>42</sup> In the same vein, only one-third of Turkish settlers disagree with continuous Turkish intervention in the TRNC whereas about half of indigenous Turkish Cypriots do.<sup>43</sup> It should be noted that discursive space to explore a common standpoint between Turkish settlers and indigenous Turkish Cypriots is currently minimal.

## 5 Conclusion

Ankara has come to view northern Cyprus through new geo-economic and geopolitical lenses. This explains in part why it has been expanding its influence over the TRNC's domestic politics and economy and why continuation of the status quo (a de facto two-state solution) with greater Turkish control over the TRNC is the most likely medium-term prospect. This scenario amounts to diminishing prospects for a form of re-unification with the passage of time, increasing state-facilitated criminal activity in the TRNC with some international spill-over, and continuation of Turkish hydrocarbon exploration efforts.

From an EU perspective, this is not a desirable development. To reduce its likelihood, the EU should develop a novel and more constructive political agenda for settling the internal and external dimensions of the Cyprus question in a comprehensive manner that includes all relevant parties. In particular, the EU could initiate a multilateral initiative to resolve

37 European Council, Video conference of the members of the European Council, 25 March 2021, [online](#) (accessed 10 April 2022).

38 Kaymak and Tziarras, *op. cit.* 13.

39 Kaymak and Tziarras, *op. cit.* 12; European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Council: State of play of EU-Turkey political, economic and trade relations, March 2021.

40 Doğu Akdeniz: Kıbrıs açıklarında doğalgaz arama krizi nasıl başladı, hangi ülke ne istiyor?, BBC, 10 July 2019, [online](#) (accessed 25 January 2022)

41 Kenny, Peter, 5+1 Cyprus talks start at UN in Geneva, *Anadolu Agency*, 27 April 2021, [online](#) (accessed 16 December 2021)

42 Sonan, S., Küçükşeber, E. and Porat, E., *Kuzey Kıbrıs'ta Siyaset ve Toplum: Bir Anket Çalışması*, Nicosia: Friedfrich Ebert Stiftung, pp. 30-33.

43 *Ibid.* pp. 28-29.

the eastern Mediterranean EEZ question in a bid to take the geo-economic interests out of the geopolitical equation. Such an initiative would need to include TRNC representation, work towards an agreement on maritime demarcation in relation to hydrocarbon exploration (the latter is currently excluded from the formal Cyprus negotiation framework) and ultimately develop a mechanism for joint energy resource management.<sup>44</sup>

Once the hydrocarbon business is in quieter waters, Ankara and Brussels could agree to a period of several years that allows communities across Cyprus to engage with one another in a bid to rebuild relations, discuss options for the future, and share experiences. It is only after an extended period of bottom-up debate and dialogue that any political solution for the future of the island can be meaningfully discussed and/or put to a plebiscite.<sup>45</sup>

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44 Kaymak and Tziarras, *op. cit.* 14.

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45 As part of a parallel confidence building process, Turkey could open its ports to Cypriot vessels, which is also required to revise the Customs Union agreement. *Ibid.*

### About the Clingendael Institute

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