

PLAYING WITH FIRE
Turkey, Russia, and East Med Gas
Q&A

Tassos Symeonides
(RIEAS Academic Advisor)

Copyright: Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr)
Publication date: 27 January 2019.

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS).

Turkey's neo-sultan and President Putin met in Moscow to discuss Syria. Ankara and Moscow appear closer than never before. What are the implications of this rapprochement for Western security and stability in East Med?

During a radio broadcast in October 1939, Winston Churchill spoke of Russia thus: "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest."

Churchill's memorable words are as current today as they were in 1939—and the West is watching and hoping for the best as it stands indecisive and divided over a million things. The Western allies, and particularly the US, have allowed Erdogan to run rampant. Fearing the "loss" of Turkey (a 'loss' that has already happened given Erdogan's fanatical Islamist views and his dictatorial grip on his country) the West speaks the usual fierce words about Turkey's turn toward Moslem fundamentalism but holds a very short stick. This mushy approach is pregnant with risks. Putin is deftly manipulating and exploiting Western confusion to solidify Russian penetration of the Middle East, exploit Turkey's prostrate predicament and Erdogan's delusions of grandeur, and return Russia to the once Soviet "glory" in Med waters.

The Moscow meeting, during which Putin described his Turkish visitor as a "dear friend," confirmed yet again the Western failure in Syria and, by extension, the strengthening of the previously unlikely Russian-Turkish "friendship and cooperation" axis.

President Trump's sudden decision to withdraw the token US military contingent from Syria has further complicated an already impossible situation by offering Putin and Erdogan leverage to promote their respective plans. Expanding Moscow-Ankara cooperation cannot but destabilize an already impossible situation even more. The two newly created "comrades" have clearly anti-West objectives and the willingness to play rough and aggressively probe oscillating Western positions. In the absence of concrete and *immediate* concerted Western counteraction, this "friendship made in Turco-Russian heaven" stands to swell rapidly and

create a dangerous Western security breach in East Med and the Middle East.

Enter natural gas. Turkey has gone berserk threatening anyone planning to explore in Cypriot waters for this precious fuel. Meantime, Greece, Cyprus, and Israel are positively coalescing under the umbrella Eastern Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and, more recently, as partners in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) that also includes Italy, Jordan, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority. What are the implications here?

There is little doubt Moscow and Ankara see the EMP/EMGF as a serious strategic threat; the [EMGF's stated objectives](#), in particular, should be a red cape to both Russia and Turkey, the latter standing alone in the region thanks to Erdogan's threats flying in all directions and deliberate strangling of democratic domestic opposition. Moscow is also strongly averse to anything that can jeopardize its current natural gas grip on EU countries -- and the EMGF's promise to build a pipeline that would bring Israeli gas to Europe only galvanizes Russian opposition. Turkey is already beating the drums of war against Greece and Cyprus as part of its perpetual grab for territory in the Aegean and its determination to absorb the occupied northern part of Cyprus as a Turkish province; to Turkish eyes, the EMGF is a *direct threat* since it will empower both Greece and Cyprus, not to mention Israel.

The picture is further complicated by President Trump's acrobatics in Syria and his highly contradictory handling of relations with the neo-sultan. Right now US foreign policy operates on two different levels disassociated from each other: one is the president's "Tweeter policy" and the other is what the "establishment," i.e. government departments, appears to pursue in defending and promoting American interests. But, having said that, the good news is the EMGF's sister project, the Eastern Mediterranean Partnership, has already [attracted](#) unqualified Trump administration support. With giant US energy actors in the play of Cypriot/Israeli drilling for natural gas, it is difficult to see how the American position could switch in favor of Turkey thanks to a Trump sudden about-face. This estimate is reinforced by the recent Trump [public threat](#) "to devastate" the Turkish economy if the neo-sultan attacks the US-supported Kurds in Syria as US forces withdraw from that country.

Turkey wages a relentless war of nerves in the Aegean aiming at Greece. EMP/EMGF activity further feeds Ankara's appetite for a violent incident that could be exploited to blackmail Athens into strategic concessions in the Archipelago. Would Moscow countenance such Turkish aggression that could create unwanted situations? Should we expect concrete European/US reaction to Turkish aggression?

At first, the long depressing history of the Aegean crisis discourages any thought of a Western reaction *actively supporting Greece to defend against a Turkish attack*.

Having said that, however, there have been tectonic changes affecting both Europe and the US in the last two decades. These changes have radically impacted many of the constants that characterized the behavior of Greece's "allies and partners" globally and regionally. For example, many in Europe and the US have come to advocate even Turkey's expulsion from

NATO and the Turcophiles in Washington and EU capitals face an uphill battle trying to sell Turkey as the traditional “rampart” of Western defense.

Turkey’s unabashed alignment with Russia and Iran in Syria has also caused Ankara to lose heavily in Western capitals, with Turkish diplomatic claims that Turkey is still as “staunch a Western ally” as before being met with often coldish and equally diplomatic smiles.

Furthermore, energy is now *the* issue occupying especially the Europeans (outside ‘unauthorized migration’). The stakes are enormous. If one dares to make a prediction, Germany and its EU satellites have become much more sensitive to Turkey’s thuggish behavior and may surprise the neo-sultan in case of a sudden Turkish play to destabilize the southern wing as [he continues his saber-rattling](#).

Russia, meantime, has been emboldened especially by the turn of events in Syria, where Assad’s criminal regime seems secure (for the time being). But nobody can accuse Putin of not being a careful player. He knows better than anybody else in the game that Erdogan is hardly dependable as an “ally” when it comes to making a commitment to permanent Russian strategic interests. It follows that the Russian president may have serious objections to Turkey launching a hell-bent “hot incident” in the Aegean that could light the fuse of a Western response which remains unpredictable.

In short, the current “balance” in East Med is fragile enough to discourage sudden moves by *anyone* as part of a Hail Mary pass, with Turkey being the primary candidate of making such a foolish gesture.

The EMP/EMGF have triggered unprecedented cooperation initiatives in East Med. What should be the next move(s) as the budding partners get closer to constructing a lasting strategic relationship?

While Turkey draws attention because of its constant threatening, fuming and chest-beating, the real opponent to watch is Russia. The planned East Med pipeline is an open challenge to Russia, especially [since the US](#) “welcomed the pipeline as a project ‘of great importance for the prosperity and stability of the Middle East and Europe.’” Putin has not forgotten how the US swatted Moscow’s attempt to build [energy cooperation with Greece](#) just before the latter went bankrupt in 2010. East Med, therefore, is an opportunity for payback and the Russian president’s willingness to play rough should not be underestimated.

On a more positive note, the EMP is developing rapidly and its future is quite promising. Israel, in particular, has accelerated its diplomatic activities in all directions as part of breaking out of its traditional Middle East isolation—and there is already [unprecedented talk about](#) a “...historic normalization of relations between Israel and several major Arab states.” Greece, in particular, stands to strongly benefit from this surge in coalition building involving partners who, until recently, belonged to opposing hostile camps. Already, relations with Israel are blossoming, a fact that was unthinkable until a few years ago. And strengthening defense ties

with Israel offers a precious opportunity to gain from Israel's defense prowess as Turkey increases its revisionist bullying in the Aegean. And by joining the developing energy hub, Athens can strengthen the Greek economy devastated by the EU lenders.

The EMP/EMFG partners, however, should be also developing counteraction strategies against those trying to derail the East Med pipeline from *within* Europe. Spain, for example, has emerged as the most vociferous opponent in this respect fearing that the East Med energy hub will have adverse competition effects on its economy; Spain has the EU's [highest capacity](#) of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) regasification and the stakes involved are high. And to top the list, the EU's rather inflated targets of transitioning entirely to renewable forms of energy according to the 2015 Paris Agreement (already rejected by President Trump) stirs controversy inside many EU members, which guarantees more anti-EMFG turbulence in the future.

What should be the Greek priorities in this developing complex East Med power game?

Unfortunately, Greece suffers from perennial political instability made even worse by four long years of a radical left party turned "European pragmatist" holding power. Greece is a country of de facto reduced sovereignty under inspection by EU monitors. Greece's internal divisions came again to the fore recently with the vengeance over the so-called [Prespes deal](#) imposed upon the "European pragmatists" by Greece's "allies." The deal, rejected by the overwhelming majority of the electorate, demonstrated how "pliable" Greek governments can be when faced with "allied" ultimata.

Any future Greek government will continue to face a brutally restricted playing field and demands from all "allied" directions to conform to policies that are not necessarily to Greece's benefit. The "European pragmatist" interlude has undermined an already weakened position even further; it would take unprecedented political and diplomatic skill and determination to even dent this status quo—and the current Greek political lineup is hardly up to the task.

The immediate target of the next government should be the rapid strengthening of EMP/EMFG initiatives and the largest possible integration of Greece with the common policies being developed around the East Med energy initiatives.

This is the only relatively open avenue of action in view of Greece's immobile economy and discouraging mid and longer term economic prospects. With the sovereign debt still *growing* and now standing at 180 pc of GDP or €334.988 billion, not to mention a hollow banking sector burdened by €88.6 billion of nonperforming loans, "stability" becomes a contested idea.

Would the next government be able to muster the requisite political, economic, and social resources to pull the country up by its bootstraps? Those with any length of experience in Greek politics won't be putting their money on any such prospect even with a pistol pointed to their heads.

