

## Reshuffling of Political and Military Alliances

# Turkey at the Centre of the Mediterranean Geopolitical Chessboard

## Dorothee Schmid

Researcher, Head of the Contemporary Turkey and Middle East Programme  
French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), Paris

Turkey is a Mediterranean country because of its geography – 7,000 km of its coastline are bathed by the Mediterranean – and because of its history: the Mediterranean Sea and its shores were explored and dominated in the past by the Ottomans, to whom the Turkish Republic, founded in 1923, is heir. Yet modern Turkey has lived most of its existence with its back turned to this area, associated with memories of the end of the Empire, the trauma of which still lingers today through the rivalry with the Greeks in the Aegean. But Turkey's reunion with the Mediterranean now seems to be on the agenda, in a climate of nationalistic one-upmanship: between defending its national interests and wanting to upset the regional balance of power, Ankara has become a central protagonist on the Mediterranean geopolitical chessboard. All the countries around the Mediterranean now have dynamic relations with Turkey, which is seen either as an aggressive competitor or as an effective partner. The return of Turkey to the Mediterranean does not only illustrate a form of historical nostalgia: it confirms above all the full entry of the Turks into a globalization that they are tailoring to their objectives.

### Turkey's Return to the Mediterranean: Opportunism or Grand Vision?

Often perceived as a simple bout of neo-Ottoman imperialism, the recent hyperactivism of the Turks in

the Mediterranean takes on its full meaning in a more global geopolitical perspective.

### *The Turkish Historical Imprint in the Mediterranean*

The Ottomans imposed themselves in the Mediterranean by conquest, and only Morocco escaped them. It was in the 16th century, under the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, at the height of the Empire, that their naval superiority was established. The Ottoman fleet maintained constant pressure on the Christians and, with the exception of the siege of Malta in 1565, was not defeated until the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. Lepanto marked the end of the great expansion of the Ottomans, but not that of their domination in the Mediterranean: neither Cyprus nor the Holy Places were taken by the Invincible Armada, and Crete was even conquered in the 17th century. The classic narrative of an Empire in decline from that time onwards underestimates the effectiveness of the Ottoman presence maintained in North Africa, the Levant and the Balkans, and whose disintegration would only come about gradually, with an acceleration in the 19th century under the pressure of European colonisation. The longevity of the Ottoman presence can be explained in particular by a certain flexibility of administrative organization. It nevertheless left a strong imprint on societies, gastronomy, urban landscapes, art and architecture, territorial and political organization, and even the region's economic growth models.<sup>1</sup>

It was only after the First World War that the Mediterranean became an Anglo-French lake, with the victors of the conflict – France, Greece, Great Britain and Italy – even occupying the Mediterranean coasts

<sup>1</sup> MOREAU, Odile, "Notion et nature de l'État, de l'héritage ottoman aux réformes constitutionnelles modernes." *Les Cahiers de l'Orient* 2013/2 (No. 110), p. 117-134; CORM, Georges, "L'influence aottomane dans les structures socio-économiques des pays arabes et leur mode de développement." *Anatoli*, CNRS Éditions, 2014, p. 217-232.

of Anatolia until their liberation by the army of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The centre of gravity of the republic he founded shifted to the east: Istanbul lost its status as capital to Ankara, a peaceful provincial town in the middle of the country. Once the population exchanges linked to the redrawing of Turkish borders had been carried out, the Mediterranean issue was closed; its memory remains traumatic and fragmentary.<sup>2</sup>

*The Rediscovery of the Mediterranean, from Neo-Ottomanism to the Mavi Vatan*

This is how the country turned its back on the wider Mediterranean for three-quarters of its existence. The modernist project of Republican Turkey was continental, straddling Europe and Asia, and isolationist. After the Second World War, Turkey joined the Western camp, with a mission to watch over the Soviet Bloc. The strategic importance of Mediterranean issues remained present, but in a narrower version: the Montreux Convention, which had given Turkey control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits since 1936, was contested by Stalin in 1946; the territorial dispute with Greece in the Aegean Sea and the Cypriot issue have episodically poisoned the climate within NATO since the 1970s. The end of the Cold War allowed Turkey to once again assume its vocation as an intermediary country. Turkish soft power developed in the former Ottoman areas from the 1990s, under the leadership of President Turgüt Özal,<sup>3</sup> and took on another dimension with Ahmet Davutoğlu, the éminence grise of the Islamist AKP party and very active Minister of Foreign Affairs, then Prime Minister until 2016. He was the architect of the full reintegration of the Mediterranean in a renewed, global and ambitious vision of Turkish foreign policy, positively reinvesting its historical neighbourhood.

The Ottoman memory in the Mediterranean is now spectacularly staged in Turkish audio-visual productions: the biggest audio-visual production of Turkish public television, “*Barbaroslar: Akdeniz’in Kılıcı*”

(“Barbarossa: Sword of the Mediterranean,” broadcast in Turkey since autumn 2021, exalts the destinies of Oruç Reis and Hizir Reis, admirals of the Ottoman navy who took part in the expansion of the Empire in the Mediterranean in the 16th century. Recall that Algeria and Morocco are today among the biggest consumers and buyers of Turkish series. This glorification of the Ottomans has also been accompanied, for some years now, by revisionist rhetoric questioning the territorial arrangements at the end of the First World War. The preparation of the centenary of the Turkish Republic in 2023 is feeding the vengeful rewriting of the national narrative: Tayyip Erdoğan has already declared on several occasions that he considers the Lausanne Peace Treaty to be “obsolete.”

**The return of Turkey to the Mediterranean does not only illustrate a form of historical nostalgia: it confirms above all the full entry of the Turks into a globalization that they are tailoring to their objectives**

Above all, a new Turkish strategic doctrine, integrating the Mediterranean maritime space into a global vision of the country's power interests, is now being publicly discussed, although its real status within the institutions is not very clear:<sup>4</sup> the *Mavi Vatan*, or “Blue Homeland” doctrine, advocates establishing Turkish supremacy in the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean by modifying the status quo on Cyprus and the Dodecanese Islands. Very much in vogue in 2020, when Turkey was fighting victoriously in Libya and Greek-Turkish tensions were at their peak, the *Mavi Vatan* theme, borne by admirals close to the Eurasian and Russophile current, has now lost its lustre.

<sup>2</sup> PARLARDAL, Emel, “La Turquie pour la Méditerranée, de l’indifférence à l’ambiguïté.” in *L’Europe en Formation* 2010/2 (n° 356), p. 87-108

<sup>3</sup> ÇANDAR, Cengiz, “Grand Geopolitics for a New Turkey.” *Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 12, no 1, 1 January 2001, p. 22-38.

<sup>4</sup> DENIZEAU, Aurélien, “Mavi Vatan, la Patrie bleue: origines, influence et limites d’une doctrine ambitieuse pour la Turquie.” *Études de l’Ifri*, Ifri, April 2021.

## Turkey is currently exporting a post-colonial discourse to sub-Saharan Africa, targeting and disqualifying the former powers

### *An Element of Turkish Global Power*

Should we see in the renewed activity of the Turks in the Mediterranean a simple capacity to seize opportunities, the coherence of which is staged after the fact, or a surge of planned imperialism? In any case, the progression of Turkey's regional influence takes on its full meaning in a broader, international vision of Turkish power. Beyond the Levantine façade, the Mediterranean opens the doors of Africa to the Turks. Turkey's military intervention in support of the beleaguered Libyan government in Tripoli in 2020 made it possible to bring the Middle East and Africa together in a single foreign policy matrix, via a maritime delimitation agreement directly encroaching on Greek waters. The Middle East and Africa are now linked militarily – the same methods of intervention, the same fighters, the same armament used by the Turks in Libya and Syria; legally – the Turkish-Libyan maritime delimitation agreement has, like an earthquake, led to a multiplication of “aftershocks” between the countries bordering the eastern Mediterranean; and through memory – Turkey is currently exporting a post-colonial discourse to sub-Saharan Africa, targeting and disqualifying the former powers, foremost among them France.

### **Turkey's Channels of Action in the Mediterranean**

Turkish pragmatism therefore often precedes rhetorical formalization whose dissuasive effect is remarkable: the publicity surrounding the Mavi Vatan doctrine has greatly worried European partners. More specifically, Ankara has become an often convenient, rewarding and even essential partner

for the countries of the South and East Mediterranean because it mobilizes a very comprehensive range of tools.

### *The Economy at the Heart of the Reconquest*

Soft economic power has been at the heart of Turkey's external reconquest for the past 20 years. From this point of view, Fernand Braudel's old capitalist Mediterranean is a space rich in resources and markets for Ankara.

Recall that the Turkish economy itself is one of the most advanced in the region. Its GDP represents more than 40% of the total production of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Countries; it is almost the only one in its category to be a member of the OECD, with the exception of Israel. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has unleashed Turkish growth by accelerating the country's entry into globalization. With a strong industrial base, Turkey has developed a successful service sector and taken advantage of its position as a natural transit point between the Caspian, the Caucasus and the Black Sea on the one hand, and the Mediterranean on the other. Huge trade flows from Asia and the post-Soviet areas, bound for the countries around the Mediterranean, use the Bosphorus sea route. The trend towards the relocation of industrial production in the post-Covid context accentuates this situational advantage and Turkish logistical capacities are constantly adjusting to fully assume this role of economic hub: the system of ports and terminals is continuously developing from Istanbul to Mersin, and the industrial centres of the Sea of Marmara.

Major emerging countries' share in trade with the Mediterranean countries continues to grow. China and Turkey perform particularly well: in 2000, these two countries each accounted for about 2% of North African trade; by 2019, China accounted for 9% of North African trade (13% of imports) and Turkey for 4% (5% of imports).<sup>5</sup> The economic sectors of interest to Turkey in the region reflect its own growth model: construction is in the lead – Turkish companies account for 60-65% of the construction sector in Algeria, are setting up in Libya and are growing in

<sup>5</sup> French Ministry of the Economy, “Accords d'association et intégration commerciale entre l'Union européenne et l'Afrique du Nord.” *Trésor Eco* No. 296, December 2021, ([www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Articles/c637819a-0ba8-49ab-9c9a-1f011de08e2b/files/4aed41cb-f5fe-4f8e-bf4c-f94873a00938](http://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Articles/c637819a-0ba8-49ab-9c9a-1f011de08e2b/files/4aed41cb-f5fe-4f8e-bf4c-f94873a00938)).

Morocco;<sup>6</sup> tourism, the Mediterranean industry par excellence, is developing notably in its medical version (1.2 million medical tourists in Turkey in 2020, particularly from Algeria);<sup>7</sup> and the entertainment industry, with the aforementioned series of films. But energy issues are now becoming the most pressing: Ankara is seeking to diversify its sources of supply in the Mediterranean to escape the Russian grip. The Turkish authorities explicitly associate their continued presence in Libya with projects for the development of oil and gas, but also renewable energies. The successive gas discoveries in the eastern Mediterranean are also sharpening geopolitical tensions around Cyprus, with Turkey posing as the defender of Northern Cyprus' interests.

### *The Arduous Quest for a Winning Diplomatic Line*

While Turkey is a stakeholder in most of the regional cooperation mechanisms in the Mediterranean (Union for the Mediterranean, Barcelona Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea Against Pollution, etc.), its diplomacy has been more dynamically deployed in bilateral adventures for the past ten years. Ahmet Davutoğlu had invested in mediation operations, particularly in the Arab-Israeli conflict, though without much result. But the political earthquake of the Arab Spring has opened up a period of intense experimentation since 2011, overturning the AKP's conservative fundamentals: Turkey has since displayed its companionship with the political parties of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt and Tunisia, and has become involved alongside the Syrian opposition in attempting to topple the Bashar-Al-Assad regime. These options have not always been successful: Marshal Sisi's counter-revolution in Egypt drove a wedge between the two countries in 2013; the Syrian crisis has created a zone of insecurity along Turkey's entire southern border, between jihadist pockets and the extension of Kurdish territory; and Ankara had to take account of Tunisian President Kais Saïed's coup d'état in 2021, which has temporarily put an end to the last open political experiment in

the region. The Libyan issue was more productive: after having stayed out of the Franco-British military operation against Gaddafi, Turkey victoriously re-entered the game by offering its protection to the Tripoli government emerging from the UN-sponsored Skhirat Accords.

The relationship with Israel has also remained complicated since 2010, with the conflictive episode of the Mavi Marmara. Ankara's systematically pro-Palestinian positioning maintains the mistrust, despite attempts at rapprochement. The multiple tensions in the eastern Mediterranean were thus bound to lead to the ostracization of Turkey by the "Abrahamic bloc," with Israel and the United Arab Emirates coming together with Greece and Cyprus in an informal anti-Turkish front. A turnaround seems to be underway, however: the difficulties of the Turkish economy, the flexibility of Gulf diplomacy and the fallout from the Ukrainian crisis have brought the protagonists to their senses in 2022, opening a beginning of détente, displayed in March by Turkey during its major diplomatic forum in Antalya. With Africa still imposing itself as a horizon beyond the immediate Mediterranean, we must follow the progress of Turkish diplomacy towards Algeria: in the process of post-Hirak stabilization and external openness, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune seems very receptive to Turkish offers of partnership.

### *A Growing Military Presence*

Ankara has been pushing its hard power in the Mediterranean for several years now. While nearly 60,000 Turkish soldiers are still stationed in Northern Cyprus, a remnant of Operation Attila, which in 1974 was intended to protect the Turkish Cypriot minority against Greek pressure, the modernization of this presence is taking shape: a base for operating drones was officially inaugurated in 2021, and a project to build a naval base is regularly mentioned.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2020, it is above all the Turkish naval presence that has occupied analysts in the Mediterranean, as it is being ostensibly reinforced. It should

<sup>6</sup> "A new formula for collaboration: Turkey, the EU and North Africa." Sabancı & Clingendael Report, 21 March 2022, ([www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Report\\_New\\_formula\\_for\\_collaboration\\_Turkey\\_EU\\_NorthAfrica.pdf](http://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Report_New_formula_for_collaboration_Turkey_EU_NorthAfrica.pdf)).

<sup>7</sup> SAANOUNI, Mona, "La Turquie s'affirme en tant que pôle régional du tourisme médical." *Anadolu Ajansi*, 22.02.2021, ([www.aa.com.tr](http://www.aa.com.tr)).

<sup>8</sup> SCHMID, Dorothee and DAHECH, Yasmina, "La méthode turque en Méditerranée : l'emprise sur Chypre-Nord." *Briefings de l'Ifri*, 23 July 2021.

be noted that out of eight Turkish naval bases, six are located in the Mediterranean/Aegean/Sea of Marmara. The Turkish Navy, which ranks eighth in the world in terms of personnel, maintains the largest submarine fleet in the Mediterranean.<sup>9</sup> The deployment of military vessels is now regular in several places of strategic Turkish interest (gas exploration in Cyprus, the Libyan coast), while exercises are increasingly conducted on the high seas.<sup>10</sup> This insistent naval presence leads to friction with NATO allies: in addition to regular clashes with Greece and Cyprus in the Aegean Sea, an incident nearly degenerated into a confrontation with France off the Libyan coast in June 2021.

The Turkish army is also present in several theatres of land operations. In Syria, Turkey has intervened militarily three times to secure its border, has occupied several areas along the border, and threatens a new operation in the summer of 2022. The stabilization of its forces in Libya is also highly controversial: it has established four military bases along the coast around Tripoli, and maintains a contingent of 1,000 Turkish army personnel and several thousand Syrian mercenaries there, with a deployment of artillery, drones, anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems.<sup>11</sup>

To complete this military panorama, note that the Mediterranean countries are also becoming an outlet for Turkish arms sales: after Bayraktar TB2 drones, for instance, Morocco acquired seven fast attack ships and a Göktürk frigate in 2021.

### A Disputed Area: What Future for Turkey's Mediterranean Ambitions?

The Mediterranean is today a highly contested and conflictive area. The pursuit of Ankara's ambitions in this context depends on both internal and external factors. The resonance with Turkish opinion, the evolution of regional power relations and the necessary understanding with its main partners are all variables that will contribute to calibrating the country's Mediterranean priority.

### *The Weight of Mediterranean Issues within the Country*

A survivor of a military coup in 2016, Tayyip Erdoğan has since allied himself with the ultranationalist movement to govern Turkey. The militarization of Turkish activities in the Mediterranean Basin appears in these circumstances increasingly as a direct function of the AKP's internal political difficulties. While interventionism in Syria – and especially the reception of nearly 4 million refugees – or in Libya may divide the electorate, the issue of the Eastern Mediterranean is, on the other hand, more consensual in Turkey. Ankara's protests against Greece's maintenance of military forces on the Dodecanese islands thus play on the famous "Sèvres Syndrome": the atavistic fear of the dismantling of Turkish territory by external powers. Turkish opinion, including its opposition component, therefore rather supports Tayyip Erdoğan in his Mediterranean claims.

### The difficulties of the Turkish economy, the flexibility of Gulf diplomacy and the fallout from the Ukrainian crisis have brought the protagonists to their senses in 2022, opening a beginning of détente

The regions along the Mediterranean coast are historically more Western-oriented and socially open; the Aegean coast is in favour of the opposition, and Istanbul and Izmir have elected Kemalist mayors. However, the weight of history and nationalism combine here with material considerations. The three administrative regions of Turkey that have a Mediterranean coastline (Aegean Region, Mediterranean Region and Marmara Region), on a little more than a third of the country's surface area, concentrate 60% of the total population and most of the wealth: the

<sup>9</sup> OZBERK, Tayfun, "The Future of the Turkish Navy." *Naval news*, 15 Feb 2021, ([www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/02/analysis-the-future-of-the-turkish-navy/](http://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/02/analysis-the-future-of-the-turkish-navy/)).

<sup>10</sup> PEYRONNET, Arnaud, "Ambitions turques en Méditerranée : vers une accélération des frictions navales avec l'Europe ?" *Actualités FMES*, 27/06/2020, (<https://fmes-france.org/ambitions-turques-en-meditteranee-vers-une-acceleration-des-frictions-navales-avec-leurope-par-arnaud-peyronnet/>).

<sup>11</sup> *Strategic Atlas of the Mediterranean and the Middle East*, FMES, 2022.

Marmara region alone, with Istanbul, accounts for nearly half of the Turkish GDP. Industrial innovation is also strong in these territories: renewable energies are developing rapidly on the Aegean coast and the first Turkish nuclear power plant is due to be built in Akkuyu, 130 km west of Mersin, opposite Cyprus.

### *The Difficult Management of Regional Power Relations*

For the powers traditionally active in the Mediterranean, Turkey's game is essentially disruptive. The transition from a soft power perceived as peaceful to a more aggressive hard power, systematically prioritizing the balance of power, including on the diplomatic level, worries both Ankara's partners and its competitors. The American administration is concerned about the breakdown of the legal status quo in the Aegean, while the European Union is primarily affected by the vagaries of Turkey's Syrian policy: fundamental differences on the Kurdish issue and, above all, the nagging question of refugees. The agreement on immigration negotiated in 2016 in Brussels offered Turkey a substantial financial envelope (six billion euros) to settle Syrian refugees on its soil; Ankara uses it as a means of pressure on the EU, threatening to relax surveillance on its coast as soon as relations become strained. NATO is also suffering the fallout from Greek-Turkish disputes; its de-escalation mechanisms helped ease tensions in the summer of 2020, as the German EU Presidency failed to mediate and France openly sided with Athens. Greece's rearmament is now underway, with Paris and Washington competing for the biggest equipment contracts.

Turkey also has complicated relations with other important players. Russia, which is reinvesting in the Mediterranean area because of the Syrian and Libyan conflicts, is obliged to come to terms with Turkey in these two theatres. The Russian-Turkish relationship, competitive as much as it is cooperative,<sup>12</sup> is

always renewed in the end through partial arrangements that worry NATO – the fragility of the fronts remains particularly evident in Syria, from Idlib to the Jazira region. China, for its part, has placed the Mediterranean on its maritime silk road, and is gradually integrating the economic competition of the Turks into its North African equation. The Gulf monarchies, increasingly active in the post-Arab Spring context, must also deal politically with Turkey; Ankara had sided with Qatar in the dispute between it and Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, but a general reconciliation is underway, as with Israel, which does not wish to alienate Ankara for long.

**For the powers traditionally active in the Mediterranean, Turkey's game is essentially disruptive. The transition from a soft power perceived as peaceful to a more aggressive hard power worries both Ankara's partners and its competitors**

In 20 years, the Mediterranean has thus once again become an area of Turkish influence: Ankara has carved out an essential place for itself there, through its active diplomacy and its economic offer, which constitutes an alternative to European or Chinese partnerships, but also through its stated lack of aversion to military risk. After a year 2020 filled with dangers, Tayyip Erdoğan displays his stabilizing intentions without really convincing as tensions persist. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict, in the face of which Turkey is displaying neutrality, is now accentuating the pressure: Turkey is indeed guarding the gateway to the Black Sea in the Mediterranean, and military traffic is steadily increasing there.

<sup>12</sup> FACON, Isabelle, *Russie-Turquie. Un défi à l'Occident ?* Paris, Passés composés, 2022.