

The European Union in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2020: Whither Strategic Autonomy

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Introduction

The Eastern Mediterranean has emerged as one of the new high-priority regions for EU foreign and security policy and an acid test for the EU's strategic autonomy. The monetization of the sizeable hydrocarbon reserves discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean about a decade ago hit the obstacles of the Cyprus problem, the crisis in Turkey's relations with Egypt and Israel, the Syrian and the Libyan civil wars. The signing of the Libyan-Turkish memorandum in November 2019 triggered further destabilization through the proliferation of Greek-Turkish disputes over the delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) from the Aegean to the Eastern Mediterranean. The recent escalation of Greek-Turkish maritime disputes and the Cyprus problem occurred at a time the debate on Europe's 'strategic autonomy' was burgeoning. Investing in European strategic autonomy was considered indispensable for successfully promoting European interests and values in the European neighbourhood and beyond. Yet, despite repeated political pledges on a more robust and coherent EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the establishment of institutions aiming to promote and serve common EU security and diplomatic interests, the European Union has been accused of lacking resolve and leadership in a crisis involving sovereign rights of two of its member states. The European Union was accused of either siding with the interests of individual member states or failing to take a clear stance on issues of primary significance. Some viewed that the European Union could not have a meaningful contribution to conflict resolution in the Eastern Mediterranean, as it was not a 'neutral broker': it had to side with its member states and defend their interests. Others argued that the European Union was unable to communicate a clear and coherent message to actors undermining key norms of the liberal international order such as respect for international law and the use of peaceful means for conflict resolution. This article is based on primary and secondary sources identifying the concept of 'strategic autonomy' and exploring how EU foreign policymaking has been tested in one of the most significant recent regional crises, affecting key EU security and diplomatic interests and whether the goal of EU strategic autonomy, as raised in several public statements and policy documents of the European Union has come any closer.

Strategic Autonomy as an Elusive EU Objective

An unusually blunt statement of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel has pointed at the strategic infantilism of the European Union: 'We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands' (Reuters Staff, 2018). Having been repeatedly emphasised by EU

institutions and member states, the significance of developing a common EU foreign and security policy has eventually been crystallized into the ‘strategic autonomy’ debate (Bartels *et al.*, 2017; Billon-Galland and Thomson, 2018; Järvenpää *et al.*, 2019). Building EU strategic autonomy aimed to ‘strengthen EU multilateral action, reduce dependence on external actors, and make the EU less vulnerable in areas such as energy, disinformation and digital technology’ through a common understanding and political will. Otherwise, the EU was at risk of becoming a ‘playground’ for global powers in a world dominated by geopolitics (Anghel *et al.*, 2020, pp. 1–4). As Tocci (2021) argued, the etymology of the word autonomy means the ability of the self to live by its laws. However, autonomy does not automatically equate to independence and less so unilateralism or autarky. In order to do so, the EU may need to be prepared to act alone but that is not a requirement, ‘in fact, in so far as multilateralism is a defining feature of the EU’s internal constitution and external identity, its instinct will always be to act with others, beginning with its core partners the United Nations, the United States and NATO, as well as regional organisations’ (Tocci, 2021, p. 7).

Similarly, reflecting on the reasons for needing European strategic autonomy, the President of the European Council Charles Michel argued that:

Our objectives are ambitious and demanding: peace and prosperity. And this is exactly why we must make better use of all aspects of our power, be more consistent in the use of our tools. True to our values, realistic, less naive... A power working for a world that is more respectful, more ethical, and more just (Michel, 2020b).

Following the gradual withdrawal of the United States from the global picture during the presidency of Donald Trump, the strategic autonomy debate has become even more pressing for the European Union as the need to develop its own defence and security infrastructures became more prominent (European Union Global Strategy, 2016; Fiott, 2018; Howorth, 2018; Zandee *et al.*, 2020). Since the founding years of the European Union, a liberal international order based on international organizations, laws and norms endorsed and promoted by US power has been taken for granted. While the European Union has taken a stronger role in the promotion of liberal values, norms and beliefs, including free trade, climate, energy and human rights, particularly in regions within its immediate neighbourhood, its strategic dependency on the United States has never been seriously challenged. Nevertheless, the rise of the emerging powers, most notably of China, the recent US unwillingness to play the role of the global liberal hegemon and the crisis in US democratic institutions under the Trump administration have recast the strategic environment in the EU’s neighbouring regions, making clear that the European Union could no longer completely rely on the United States in articulating its own regional foreign policy. In fact, the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean made the need for greater European responsibility and risk-taking be felt more acutely (Tocci, 2021, pp. 12–16). While US disengagement from the European neighbourhood sharply accelerated under the Trump administration, it had already started under President Obama, as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was no longer considered to be of high strategic significance for the United States (Dalay, 2021). Obama’s reluctant stance in the Libyan, Syrian and Yemeni crises was in clear dissonance with the Clinton administration’s intervention in the Kosovo conflict. Even though the Biden administration is expected to help restore transatlantic relations from their Trump-era low point, a

re-engagement of the United States in the immediate European neighbourhood seems unlikely. This renders emphasis on the EU defence and security capacity and capability building indispensable. Despite institutional and political obstacles, significant progress has been recently achieved. Renewed interest in building transatlantic security bonds and initiatives like the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) has been matched by member states pledges to spend at least two per cent of their GDP on defence by 2024 and establish a new European Defence Fund (EDF). These aimed to improve the EU military industry capabilities, as new challenges abounded. In the words of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) Josep Borrell Fontelles:

But Europe's security challenges go beyond NATO's traditional remit. From the Sahel and Libya to the eastern Mediterranean, there is no shortage of crises that demand a strong European response. The task for the EU is to define a common position from which it can act in the interest of maintaining regional stability (Borrell Fontelles, 2021).

Such statements by European political elites point at the realization at the EU level of the significance of the European Union's 'coming of age' as a strategic actor, both in its nearby regions and on a global level, as well as the significance of ramping up efforts with a sense of urgency. This realization had been immediately met with suspicion – if not with outright opposition – by specific sovereignty-sensitive, Eurosceptic political actors across the member states and the political spectrum both on the left and on the right. Pre-Brexit United Kingdom and even Germany were among the states that voiced concerns about the political implications of European defence capacity building (Chappell *et al.*, 2020, pp. 594–7). Hence, such discussions could be easier made under crisis circumstances which displayed European shortcomings and the means to heal them.

The Eastern Mediterranean Crisis

Under these circumstances, the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean could be considered as an opportunity and a test case for the EU's ability to assert its strategic autonomy in a region identified by its political elites as crucial for EU interests (Ülgen, 2020; Efstathiou, 2021). The performance of the European Union's foreign and security policy in the region has never met expectations as set out either by the European Union itself, its member states and external actors. Ever since the early post-Cold War era, the launching of the Barcelona Process has signalled a strong EU interest in supporting political and economic reform in Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the EU scorecard was rather poor (Youngs, 2004). While in the context of the Arab Spring in 2011, the outbreak of democracy-driven uprisings in the region was hailed by the European Union with high hopes for liberal democratic transition in the world's least free and democratic region, reality crashed expectations: the Eastern Mediterranean eventually turned into one of the world's most unstable regions, while the security–stability nexus remained key (Bicchi, 2014; Dandashly, 2018; Roccu and Voltolini, 2018; Wolff, 2018). This was not only due to the civil wars that have ravaged Libya and Syria since 2011, but also because of the sharp deterioration of relations between key regional players and the escalation of latent conflicts. Following the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, Turkey has pronounced

high ambitions for regional leadership in the MENA region and has increasingly aligned its position with that of the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result, Turkey has become more actively involved in supporting the insurgency in numerous Arab states, most notably in Egypt, Libya and Syria. The 3 July 2013 military coup in Egypt became a watershed moment for Turkey's involvement in the region. The Erdoğan government decided to break off diplomatic relations with the military regime led by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, pushing itself deeper into regional isolation. This regional realignment has brought Turkey's relations with Israel to a historic low, as, in the meantime, the discovery of sizeable natural gas reserves within the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of Israel, Cyprus and Egypt added the energy variable to regional politics of the Eastern Mediterranean (Grigoriadis, 2014). Monetizing the discovered natural gas reserves and conducting further explorations were conditioned not only by Turkey's acerbic relations with Egypt and Israel, but also by the long-standing Cyprus problem. Turkey's refusal to recognize the Republic of Cyprus, as well as its EEZ, was compounded by the absence of Turkish Cypriot participation in all decisions related to the monetization of Cypriot natural gas reserves. The escalation of the Libyan and Syrian civil wars and the failure to reach an agreement on the Cyprus problem following the peace conference of Crans-Montana in August 2017 opened the floodgates for regional escalation. Turkey's poor relations with Israel and Egypt and its pronounced involvement in the Libyan and Syrian civil wars facilitated the emergence of trilateral and multilateral diplomatic initiatives on the monetization of natural gas reserves between Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan, Greece and Israel. In light of such new regional activism by the Cypriot and Greek foreign policymakers in the Eastern Mediterranean, atavistic encirclement fears in Turkey were triggered (Tziampiris, 2018; Tziarras, 2019). Turkey responded to the hydrocarbon exploration activities of Cyprus by organizing its own exploration missions within the Cypriot EEZ and obstructing the exploration activities of big multinational energy companies that had acquired exploration licenses from the Republic of Cyprus. Yet the critical juncture for the further destabilization of the region was the agreement of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Turkey and the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) of Libya on 27 November 2019. Beyond agreeing on military cooperation, the two sides demarcated their purported exclusive economic zones in the Eastern Mediterranean. The MoU refused to recognize EEZ rights to any Greek island located in the Eastern Mediterranean, including Crete, the fifth largest island of the Mediterranean, meaning that Turkey and Libya had claimed neighbouring EEZs suitable for bilateral cooperation between the two countries. This development triggered a new crisis in Greek-Turkish relations, rekindling a decade-old bilateral dispute over the delineation of their respective maritime zones in the Aegean Sea. On the back of this rehashed dispute, Greek-Turkish relations suffered an additional severe blow in March 2020: For several days thousands of immigrants and refugees based in Turkey attempted to breach the Greek border checkpoint at Kastaneai/Pazarkule, near the Turkish town of Edirne, with the acquiescence if not outright support of the Turkish government. This was interpreted as an attempt to distract the Turkish public opinion from Turkey's domestic and foreign policy woes and test the EU and Greek reactions (Pierini, 2020b).

The escalation of the crisis by the Turkish government continued when it decided to despatch the geological survey vessel *Oruç Reis* in July 2020, to conduct seismic research in the area between the islands of Rhodes, Megisti (Kastellorizon) and Cyprus. This

decision inflamed the already strained bilateral tensions to levels unseen since the late 1990s and similarly tested the EU and Greek resolve (Pierini, 2020a). The decision by Turkey to conduct seismic exploration activities in a maritime region that Greece considered to be part of its own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) – that is, an act of breach of sovereign rights – could not be ignored. As a response, the Greek government signed two maritime delimitation agreements with Italy on 9 June 2020 and with Egypt on 6 August 2020 respectively. These agreements were key developments, as it was the first time that Greece signed EEZ delimitation agreements, where both respect for provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and flexibility when necessary was displayed. In particular, the agreement between Greece and Egypt was concluded while German mediation efforts between Athens and Ankara were underway and contravened the respective MoU between Turkey and Libya's GNA. The effective annulment of the Turkish-Libyan MoU by the Greek-Egyptian agreement further incited the Turkish government (Grigoriadis and Belke, 2020). In response, the Turkish government resumed the seismic explorations by *Oruç Reis* in the seabed of the disputed area following the announcement of the Greek-Egyptian agreement. Greece responded by despatching a naval flotilla near the Turkish survey vessel, which then triggered the despatch of a Turkish flotilla. Escalation reached a peak on 9 August 2020, when the Greek frigate *Lemnos* rammed on the Turkish frigate *Kemal Reis*. The suspension of the seismic research activities of *Oruç Reis* a few weeks later and following a visit by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas to Athens and Ankara, brought an end to the most serious crisis in Greek-Turkish relations since the late 1990s.¹

A Test Case for European Strategic Autonomy

The Eastern Mediterranean crisis of summer 2020 emerged as a major test case for European strategic autonomy. This was not only due to the fact that two member states, Cyprus and Greece, were directly involved in the confrontation. It was also because of clear references to the components of European strategic autonomy throughout the crisis: international law, norms and values were repeatedly invoked, and the ability of the EU to make these elements respected in the region was questioned. Regional experts pointed at the militarization of EU-Turkey relations, while a rift between France and Germany was observed (Adar and Toygür, 2020, pp. 3–4). This was not the first time that the two states took a different stance on how to manage a crisis in the region. In the beginning of the Libyan uprising against the Qaddafi regime in 2011, Germany's opposition to the use of military means against the regime did not prevent France from organizing air strikes, playing a crucial role in toppling the Qaddafi regime and dismantling Libya's state institutions. Nine years later, in summer 2020, France gave full diplomatic support to Cyprus and Greece in their dispute with Turkey over their EEZ and projected its military weight in the region by sending naval forces and taking part in military drills with Cyprus, Italy and Greece in late August 2020. Moreover, it spearheaded an initiative bringing together all southern EU member states in a show of solidarity for Cyprus and Greece. In one of the several tirades he exchanged with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,

¹Greek-Turkish relations reached a low point on 15 February 1999, when the leader of Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan-PKK*) and Turkey's most wanted person Abdullah Öcalan, was abducted by US and Turkish intelligence agents on his way from the Greek Embassy in Kenya to Nairobi airport.

President Emmanuel Macron argued that Turkey was no longer a partner in the region or a strategic NATO ally. On the other hand, Germany avoided full identification with the position of Cyprus and Greece, objected to a punitive, sanctions-based agenda against Turkey and appeared keen on maintaining an open diplomatic channel with Turkey. The apparent aim was to bring an end to unilateral moves by all sides and pave the way for the resumption of negotiations between Greece and Turkey through the resuscitation of a process that had fallen into lapse in 2016. Germany facilitated several meetings among senior Greek and Turkish officials. The shuttle diplomacy of German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas further contributed to de-escalation, as Turkey suspended its exploration activities in the region and all naval forces returned to their bases. As deliberations within the EU institutions continued, France took the initiative of a regional summit. On 10 September 2020, the leaders of seven southern EU member states (Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain, and Portugal) met in Ajaccio, on the island of Corsica in the Mediterranean giving a strong support message to Cyprus and Greece. In the summit communiqué, the seven leaders reiterated their ‘full support and solidarity with Cyprus and Greece in the face of the repeated infringements on their sovereignty and sovereign rights, as well as confrontational actions by Turkey’ and stated that ‘they regretted that Turkey has not responded to the repeated calls by the European Union to end its unilateral and illegal activities,’ urged Turkey to ‘end unilateral and illegal activities in the eastern Mediterranean and resume dialogue to ease tensions in the region’ (Associated Press, 2020; Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs of the French Republic, 2020). In a communiqué of the French government, it was stated that France is ‘bringing together the nations of Southern Europe with the aim of: (a) working together to defend European interests in the Mediterranean; and (b) asserting the need for clear, strong European engagement in the Mediterranean region’. In addition, it was stressed that France ‘has a dual ambition: (a) to defend European independence in the Mediterranean and (b) to encourage the resumption of German mediation between Greece and Turkey’ (Government of the French Republic, 2020).

In other words, French and German efforts could be seen not as contradicting but as complementing each other. France endorsed Germany’s strategic objective of resuming Greek-Turkish exploratory talks, even though its tactical moves were clearly different from the German ones. The common aim was ‘de-escalation so as to allow for the early resumption and smooth continuation of direct exploratory talks between Greece and Turkey’ (European Council, 2020). Following a comprehensive debate, the European Council acknowledged in October 2020 that ‘a more stable and predictable Eastern Mediterranean region is in our strategic interest’ and agreed on a ‘common foreign policy attitude towards Turkey which is firm and ready to engage’. Reference was made to ‘engaging in a positive EU-Turkey agenda with a focus on topics such as the modernisation of the customs union and trade facilitation, people to people contacts, high-level dialogues and continued cooperation on migration and freedom of movement (Michel, 2020a). Besides, the European Council noted that ‘regrettably Turkey has engaged in unilateral actions and provocations and escalated its rhetoric against the EU, EU Member States and European leaders,’ while it underscored its cooperative and complementary approach with the United States on ‘the coordination of the matters relating to Turkey and the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean’ (European Council, 2020, pp. 11–12). This insistence on dialogue emanated from ‘the EU’s strategic interest in

the development of a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Turkey.’ Yet this relationship would not be a ‘free lunch’ for Turkey; it would come with terms and conditions. It would be defined by the principles shaping the EU’s foreign policy and its view on global order at large. Turkey could not freeride on EU institutions respect for international law and norms; adherence to non-violent resolution of disputes and multilateralism were presented as prerequisites for all parties and as precondition for a mutually beneficial relationship to develop. Emphasis on high-level dialogue and customs union illustrated enduring ambitions to transform the Mediterranean into a more democratic, stable and peaceful region through treaties aiming a rule-based order while promoting European values and interest (European Council, 2020, 2021). These points were reiterated later in 2021 in the visit of the President of the European Council Charles Michel and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen to Ankara and in their meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Michel, 2021).

Conclusion

The resumption of the exploratory talks between the Greek and Turkish sides was finally achieved in January 2021. This gave the two countries a long-due and much-needed diplomatic channel for preventing escalation, regarding the outstanding maritime disputes and could be considered as a success of EU diplomacy. Moreover, launching a CSDP mission off Libya’s coast to enforce the UN arms embargo to the various factions participating in the Libyan civil war indicated the Union’s potential role in its periphery: Operation ‘Irinì’ signalled an upgrade of EU military involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean (Efstathiou, 2021). In addition, building economic ties and synergies across one of least interconnected regions has also appeared to be of primary importance, as these could serve regional stability and sustainability. The establishment of the East Med Gas Forum by Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority in January 2019 was hailed as a step for promoting rules-based regional cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean with the aim to develop and regulate the natural gas market in the region (Reuters Staff, 2020). While Turkey’s absence from the new regional organization was due to its poor relations with most of the members participating in the nascent organization, it certainly limited the prospects of the East Med Gas Forum to fulfil its mission. On the other hand, while nothing implied Turkey’s permanent exclusion, participation in multilateral initiatives and regional organizations requires a common normative framework. While no regional initiative in the Eastern Mediterranean can be considered complete without Turkey’s membership or contribution, or without considering Turkey’s legitimate interests, it is also clear that Turkey could not freeride on EU institutions respect for international law and norms to impose its views by means of violence or threats thereof. Every littoral state has to play by the same rules for a mutually beneficial relationship to develop. The disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean can be resolved through international adjudication on the basis of the UNCLOS. There are numerous verdicts of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea that provide some hints about how a possible solution could look like (Grigoriadis and Belke, 2020). Giving Turkey the impression that it could escape UNCLOS provisions on the delimitation of the maritime zones in the Eastern

Mediterranean and impose its own claims on Cyprus and Greece because of its growing military and diplomatic clout in the region was clearly out of the question.

Despite the failure of hydrocarbons to become a peace catalyst, energy maintained a strong transformative potential on the regional level. The December 2019 European Green Deal and the gradual transition from hydrocarbon to renewables could herald a new era for energy economics and geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean. Unlike in the case of hydrocarbons, renewable energy development could provide a novel and potentially valuable framework for the promotion of regional cooperation. The organization of an international conference on the Eastern Mediterranean could set the foundations to overcome the current stalemate and put forward a positive agenda for the whole region and all littoral states.

The Eastern Mediterranean crisis in the summer of 2020 has offered some important lessons for the European Union. The US disengagement from the region has led to a new strategic environment which made the EU presence even more pertinent and essential for regional stability. While the EU's performance was neither spectacular nor distressing, it made clear that harbouring a common strategic vision and a stronger capacity to act requires the ability to make timely decisions in accordance with its norms and implement them alone or in collaboration with partners. In light of the summer 2020 experience, the need to reach EU's strategic emancipation by raising its security and diplomatic calibre to a level commensurate to its economic and normative weight has become even more acute. This should by no means lead to EU unilateralism or isolationism. As Borrell argued after the summer 2020 crisis:

There has been much talk of achieving 'European strategic autonomy', but what does that mean in practice? Autonomy should not imply total independence or isolation from the rest of the world. Rather, it refers to an ability to think for oneself and to act according to one's own values and interests. The European Union needs to achieve this kind of autonomy, while at the same time strengthening our alliances and preserving our commitments to multilateralism and openness (Borrell Fontelles, 2021).

Looking into the future, introducing qualified majority voting (QMV) in the Council of the European Union decision-making rules on a range of issues around foreign and security policy would strengthen the capacity to make swift decisions and engage in multilateral actions. Such a move would manifest common political will to take risks in defence and promotion of common values. This would be the litmus test for European strategic autonomy and the price that EU member states should pay to become truly relevant as a group in regional and global affairs.

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