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Recent Turkish Naval Harassment of Greece and Cyprus

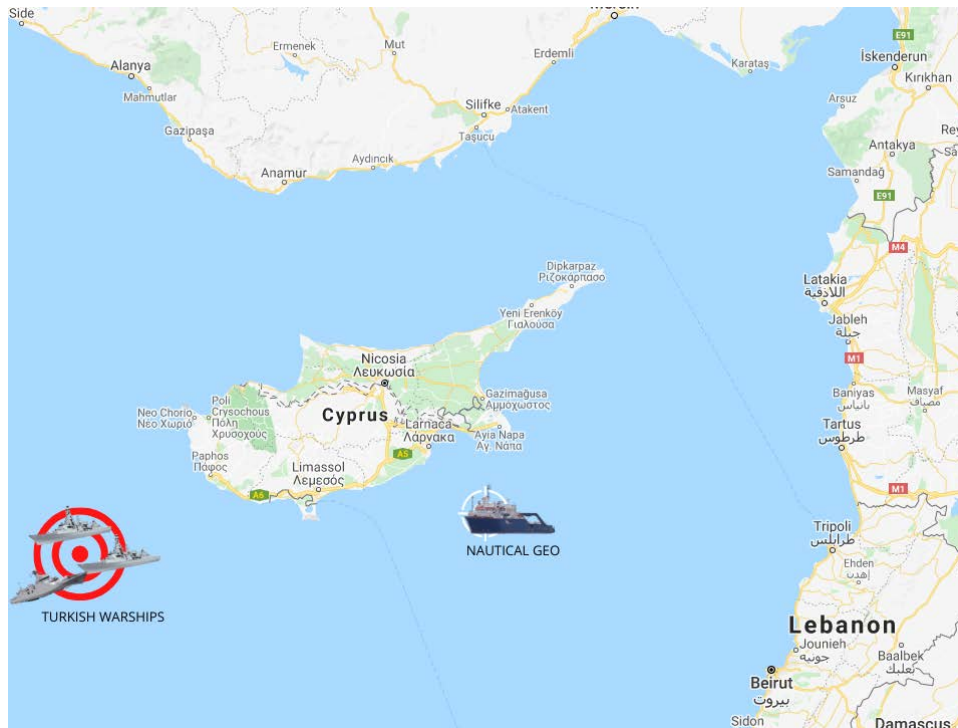
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Turkey has resumed its naval harassment of another NATO ally of the United States, Greece, in an attempt to force concessions in a territorial dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean. Continued Turkish bellicosity is likely to continue so long as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan believes there is no price to pay for it. To encourage a diplomatic solution, and forestall the possibility of escalation, the United States should condemn Turkish actions, work with other NATO partners to apply coordinated political and, if necessary, economic pressure on Turkey to encourage good-faith negotiations, strengthen its deterrent posture in the Eastern Mediterranean, and expand security cooperation with Greece and other partners safely navigating these critical waters.

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias's visit Washington on October 14 is an opportunity for the United States to signal its commitment to ensuring stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. The United States and Greece are expected to sign a Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement (MDCA) that could enable the U.S. military to deploy at a new naval base on the island of Crete and an air and sea base on Skyros Island in the Aegean Sea.

What Happened?

- On October 3, the Turkish navy turned back the Maltese-flagged *Nautical Geo*, a [Greek Cypriot-contracted research vessel](#) that Ankara alleges was trespassing its territorial waters. Turkish naval vessels also stopped the *Nautical Geo* the previous week while it was anchored near Crete.
- Shortly thereafter, [Turkey conducted](#) naval drills in the Mediterranean from October 3-5 and live-fire drills on October 5 in the Aegean. These were announced as retaliation for earlier Greek [military drills in the Aegean Sea](#).
- On October 6, Greek and Turkish officials [held bilateral meetings](#) in Ankara as part of an effort to deescalate tensions.



Why Is It Important?

- Under Erdoğan, Turkey's pattern of aggressive and uncompromising behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean is a growing problem for U.S. allies and partners, fueling instability, undermining potential economic development, eroding energy security, raising the possibility of armed conflict.
 - Progress in bilateral talks between Greece and Turkey remains unlikely; Ankara's renewed naval harassment and drills are meant as leverage to force Greek territorial compromises.
 - So long as Turkey believes it will pay no price for its aggression, it will likely continue.
 - The persistence of territorial disputes is preventing the development of the Eastern Mediterranean's energy resources, which are vital to driving economic growth in the region and providing Europe with energy diversity.
- Disagreements over exclusive economic zone (EEZ) rights in the Eastern Mediterranean have centered around the area where the territorial claims of Egypt, Cyprus, and Israel meet. The discovery of natural gas in [Israel's Tamar field in 2009](#) alerted regional actors to the potential existence of large deposits and fueled competition to find and extract these resources.
 - Ankara takes an expansive view of its EEZ that infringes on the claims of Greece and Cyprus. Only Libya recognizes Turkey's claims.
- Turkey has repeatedly resorted to maritime harassment—using its navy to harass ships exploring for natural gas resources in Greek and Cypriot waters—to support its EEZ claims.
 - France and Italy have also blamed Turkey for [blocking access to Cypriot waters](#) and [sending in Turkish own drill ships](#). In 2020, France [suspended its involvement](#) in NATO's

Mediterranean operations after one of its ships was harassed by the Turkish navy. Greek and Turkish [warships collided](#) during August 2020 at the height of tensions.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- To ensure stability in Eastern Mediterranean and allow for the peaceful development of the region's energy resources, the Biden administration and Congress should make clear to Ankara that it cannot force territorial concessions through harassment, or it will face political and economic consequences. This requires U.S. political pressure for good-faith Turkish negotiation coupled with regional force presence and security relationships with reliable partners in the region to signal U.S. commitment to stability.
- Immediate Action:
 - Congress should authorize appropriation of additional funds in the FY 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to expand U.S. basing opportunities at Souda Bay, which currently operates at capacity. Souda Bay offers the best harbor in the Eastern Mediterranean for large U.S. ships and provides access to the Bosphorus and Black Sea, Suez Canal, Red Sea, Indian Ocean, the Straits of Sicily and ultimately the Atlantic Ocean.
 - In addition to signing an MDCA with Greece, the Biden administration should condemn President Erdoğan's hostility. Legislators should also pass a resolution underscoring this message.
 - President Biden should right size diplomacy with Turkey by limiting or eliminating presidential interaction with Erdoğan. Biden should also appoint a Special Envoy to the Eastern Mediterranean, as [proposed in a 2020 JINSA report](#), who can devote attention to addressing the region's transnational conflicts, such as EEZ claims and the Libyan civil war.
 - The Pentagon should increase its intelligence-sharing and capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean, specifically with Greece, to deter Turkish aggression, including: deploying ships or unmanned systems capable of conducting patrols and positioning radar and air defenses.
 - The House and Senate Armed Services Committees should hold hearings in concordance with the release of its global force posture review and ask Department of Defense officials about how basing in the Eastern Mediterranean can fulfill a broad set of missions across regions and combatant commands, including terrorism and strategic competition in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.
 - Based on provisions initially spelled out in 2019 [legislation](#), enact sustained, predictable amounts of U.S. foreign military financing (FMF), military education and training (IMET) and excess defense articles (EDA) for Greece, which will enable Athens to grow its complementary role to Washington as a regional security provider.
- Long-term Action Items:
 - President Biden should pursue a [bureaucratic and transactional strategy](#) toward Turkey that assembles a coalition of Atlantic and Mediterranean states to present a united front

against Turkish aggression. Such a partnership could also offer Erdoğan better relations if he reforms his policies, including facilitating energy development talks or joint efforts to counter Russia in the Black Sea, Caucasus, and Middle East.

- The United States should more persistently engage with Greece's multiple trilaterals; expand the frequency and scale of rotational deployments through underutilized Greek military installations at Alexandroupolis, Larissa, and Stefanovikeio; and work with the Hellenic Armed Forces to integrate with U.S. deployments in the region, as [a 2020 JINSA report](#) recommended.

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