

FISHING IN TROUBLED WATERS:
CHINA, TURKEY, AND THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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ABSTRACT

The article seeks to explain the conspicuous lack of alignment and mutual support between Turkey and China on their respective regional maritime disputes. A comparison of the maritime disputes between Turkey and its neighbors in the Eastern Mediterranean with China and its neighbors in the South China Sea reveal fundamental differences in each country's respective legal positions. However, fundamental similarities in their behavior and political positions ultimately means alignment is possible. What has so far precluded such an alignment has to do with China's long-standing strategic view toward the Eastern Mediterranean as part of a larger global strategic vision that began during the Cold War during the 1960s-1970s. This has evolved since the Cold War into what can be inferred as a deliberate strategy of hedging in its economic diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean, by evaluating its conspicuous absence in key energy projects. This analysis contributes to understand China's growing influence in key regions around the world, and may be of particular relevance in understanding how China's influence in the Eastern Mediterranean could figure into solutions between Turkey and its neighbors.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean and East and South China Seas bear striking similarities. Tension and conflict arose in both regions at roughly the same time in the late 1960s and early 1970s, coinciding with rising global demand and exploration for offshore oil and gas, and the creation of a codified United Nations International Law of the Sea [UNCLOS]. In both regions, moreover, China and Turkey have made expansive maritime claims on spurious legal grounds, and have sought to assert their sovereignty over these claims by unilateral exploration and drilling, engaged in acts of coercion against rival claimants and foreign companies, and have spurned third-party dispute mechanisms. This increasingly aggressive behavior in recent years has even augured similar regional responses, with regional states forming strategic alignments against them to resist expansionist claims and the challenge they pose to regional and international norms.

There is a large body of literature on both of these regional conflicts, written from numerous perspectives by scholars of various disciplines. Scholars and analysts alike have also noted an increasing convergence on economic, security and strategic goals between the two countries. Yet there has been virtually no rigorous comparison of Turkey and China's legal claims and positions in their respective regional disputes, nor have people sought to explain the lack of convergence in this area. This paper aims to answer the question: Why has China not sought to align itself with Turkey against many of the same challenges it faces in the East and South China Sea?

This paper considers several possible explanations to this question. The first is that similarities between these regional disputes are superficial, and Turkish and Chinese claims rest on fundamentally different legal arguments. The second possible argument is that Turkey's

membership in NATO precludes China from considering Turkey as a full strategic partner, as it does with, for example, Russia. A third possible explanation has to do with China's treatment of its Uighur population in Xinjiang, which could act as a volatile wedge issue in bilateral relations, preventing a close strategic alignment on other issues. These explanations offer important considerations, yet they are insufficient in explaining China's perspective towards Turkey and its maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean.

This paper argues that there is a case to be made for China to align itself with Turkey and support its position in the Eastern Mediterranean, despite differences in their respective legal cases. The reason this has never taken place is because, at the time China established relations with Turkey, it also established friendly relations with other countries in the region, such as Greece. More importantly, the historical record clearly shows that China's leaders were preoccupied with larger strategic designs against the Soviet Union and saw themselves as incapable of providing meaningful assistance, due to their distance and weakness relative to other powers in the region. However, as China's influence around the world has grown and its role in the region has grown through numerous and high-profile BRI projects, China's strategy has evolved in line evolved toward one that is best explained by hedging practices in international relations.

The paper is divided as follows: In the next chapter, it is useful to provide a description of both regions and their respective maritime disputes from the early 1970s and to today, and a brief summary of alternative explanations. Chapter 3 compares Chinese and Turkish claims in their respective regions, the actions they have taken to assert their claims, and how they see resolutions, for the purpose of establishing a plausible basis for alignment. Chapter 4 analyzes China's position and perspective from the 1970s, when its relations with Turkey and other

Eastern Mediterranean countries were first established, and the origin of both China and Turkey's maritime disputes. Chapter 4 will focus on China in the Eastern Mediterranean today, and how its strategy has evolved to increase its influence and role in the region while avoiding the risk of confrontation by the United States or entanglement in disputes between Turkey and Greece.

CHAPTER 2. OVERVIEW

The scope of this paper deals aims to specific regions, the Eastern Mediterranean and the East and South China Sea. Particular attention is focused on the prior region, and its two interconnected disputes; maritime disputes between Turkey and Greece in the Aegean, and disputes between Turkey and Cyprus in the latter's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This paper's major focus is the beginning of the disputes in the 1970s, which were both touched off by the discovery of hydrocarbons, and ongoing maritime disputes in both regions today, which also deal with a renewed competition for hydrocarbon resources. It is worthwhile to provide an initial overview of this history before going into subsequent analyses.

During the Cold War, the Eastern Mediterranean was a critical theater of competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Soviet ambitions for Turkish territory and perceived subversion of internal Greek conflict by Communist influence led the United States, in 1947, to explicitly support both countries in what became to be known as the Truman Doctrine.¹ Turkey and Greece were integrated into NATO as its critical "southern flank" and tensions between the two countries were submerged by the overriding strategic logic of the Cold War. At the same time, during the early years of the Cold War, the British Empire gradually shed its imperial possessions around the world, and in 1960 signed the Treaty of Nicosia which established the Republic of Cyprus.² The UK also signed treaties with Turkey and Greece which provided that all had the right to maintain "the independence, territorial integrity and security" of Cyprus.³

¹ "Milestones: 1945–1952 - Office of the Historian." <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine>.

² "Treaty Concerning the Establishment of the Republic of Cyprus (Treaty of Nicosia) | UN Peacemaker." Accessed April 17, 2022. <https://peacemaker.un.org/cyprus-nicosia-treaty60>.

³ Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "From Rep. of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs."

A gradual breakdown in relations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots in the 1960s, and disagreements over maritime territory in the Aegean, led to a rupture in Greco-Turkish relations by the early 1970s. Coinciding with technological advancements and global energy demand in the 1960s and 1970s, especially after the 1973 oil crisis, significant deposits of oil were discovered offshore in the Aegean in 1968.⁴ The first oil exploration license was sold to an international consortium in 1970, and drilling took place in 1971 and 1972, finding oil and gas. In response, in 1973, Turkey granted licenses to its state-owned petroleum company, to explore for oil and gas in maritime areas located on the continental shelves of numerous Greek islands.⁵

Meanwhile, years of tension between the Greek Cypriot community and the Turkish Cypriot community in Cyprus led, in 1974, to a coup against Cypriot President Makarios III. Turkey, asserting its right as one of the three “Guarantor Powers,” invaded Cyprus in support of the Turkish Cypriots and established a militarily occupied zone in the north. Turkish Cypriot authorities in the militarily occupied zone formally declared independence as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in 1983. From then on, Turkey recognizes the TRNC as an independent state, and refuses to recognize the Republic of Cyprus’s sovereignty over the island, and advocates for the interests of the Turkish Cypriots of the TRNC. Turkey objected to Cyprus signing delimitation agreements with Egypt in 2003, Lebanon in 2007, and Israel in 2010 because it infringed on Turkey’s own continental shelf, and because it did not include the participation of Turkish Cypriots.⁶ In response, Turkey signed its own bilateral delimitation

⁴ Blake, G H “World Maritime Boundary Delimitation: The State of Play” in Blake (Chapter 1, n 150) 8.

⁵ Alexis Phylactopoulos, “Mediterranean Discord: Conflicting Greek-Turkish Claims on the Aegean Seabed,” *The International Lawyer* 8, no. 3 (1974): 433.

⁶ ACER, YÜCEL. “Turkey’s Legal Approach to Maritime Boundary Delimitation in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.” *Insight Turkey* 23, no. 1 (2021): 101

agreement with the TRNC in 2011, and the TRNC granted energy exploration rights to Turkey's state-owned petroleum company for areas located in Cyprus's EEZ in 2012.⁷⁸

Similar maritime disputes have taken place roughly over the same period of time between China and its neighbors in the East and South China Sea. In January 1974, the navies of China and South Vietnam clashed over the Paracel Islands, beginning a decades-long effort for control over the South China Sea.⁹ In subsequent years, China went on to seize land features in the area also claimed by countries like Vietnam and Malaysia, on the basis of its "historic rights" since "time immemorial."¹⁰ In the case of the East China Sea dispute between China and Japan, rival claims are similarly based on historical evidence, and like the Aegean, became a major issue after the discovery of oil in the area. In meetings with Japanese diplomats in 1971, Zhou Enlai remarked, "Because there is oil, it is a problem. If there was no oil, neither Taiwan nor the US would be an issue."¹¹

Similarities in China and Turkey's increasingly aggressive tactics also seem to coincide with increasing nationalism in each country's domestic political situations. First elected in 2003, President Erdogan of Turkey has undermined Turkey's long-standing secular and democratic tradition by ushering in what has been described as "Erdoğan-style *demokrasi*," characterized by populism, majoritarianism, and a mixture of Islam and intolerant Turkish nationalism."¹² A

⁷ PRNewswire, "Noble Energy Announces Significant Natural Gas Discovery Offshore Republic of Cyprus," December 28, 2011. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/noble-energy-announces-significant-natural-gas-discovery-offshore-republic-of-cyprus-136305648.html>.

⁸ "Turkish TPAO Planning to Launch Oil and Natural Gas Drilling in TRNC," *Business Turkey*, April 14, 2012. <https://business-turkeytoday.com/turkish-tpao-planning-to-launch-oil-and-natural-gas-drilling-in-trnc.html>.

⁹ Toshi Yoshihara, "THE 1974 PARACELS SEA BATTLE," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (Spring 2016), 41.

¹⁰ "Beijing Has Case for 'historic Rights' at Sea." April 1, 2016. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cohk//eng/Topics/scs/t1352537.htm>.

¹¹ "Record of the Third Meeting Between Prime Minister Tanaka and Premier Zhou Enlai." Wilson Center Digital Archive. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121228>.

¹² Kirişçi, Kemal, and Amanda Sloat. "The Rise and Fall of Liberal Democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West," *Brookings Institute*, February 26, 2019, 3. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FP_20190226_turkey_kirisci_sloat.pdf

similar brand of strongman rule has brought about similar trends in China, as President Xi Jinping has pursued a course of “national rejuvenation” and engaged in nationalist rhetoric that has led to a newly assertive foreign policy, a decisive break with China’s previous adherence to a “peaceful rise” and a “hide capabilities and bide time” strategy.¹³

In each of their respective regional contexts, similarly assertive Turkish and Chinese behavior has led to correspondingly similar backlash by neighbors. In the context of the South China Sea, rival claimants in Southeast Asian has stiffened ASEAN resistance against China’s claims and behavior. At the same time, a strategic alignment formed between the U.S. and other maritime powers – nicknamed the “Quad” – for the purpose of creating a “free and open Indo-Pacific” as a way to counter Chinese aims to restrict freedom of navigation in the region.¹⁴ In parallel, a trilateral strategic alignment between Greece, Cyprus and Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean has formed implicitly against Turkey, on the basis of joint cooperation on regional energy development.¹⁵ Deepening U.S. support for the Eastern Mediterranean alignment, furthermore, was evidenced by the passage of the Eastern Mediterranean Energy and Security Act.¹⁶ Both Turkish and Chinese observers have inferred from these regional responses attempts at encirclement, and claim they are exacerbating regional tensions.^{17,18}

¹³ Elizabeth Economy, “The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State,” from “Excerpt: The Third Revolution,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/excerpt-third-revolution>

¹⁴ Speech by Antony Blinken, “A Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” December 14, 2019. <https://www.state.gov/a-free-and-open-indo-pacific/>.

¹⁵ Joshua Krasna, “Israel-Greece-Cyprus Take on Turkey in the Mediterranean,” *Al Monitor*, January 22, 2020. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/01/israel-turkey-greece-cyprus-benjamin-netanyahu-natural-gas.html>.

¹⁶ “Congress Passes Menendez-Rubio Bill Reshaping U.S. Policy in Eastern Mediterranean | United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.” 2019. https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/congress-passes-menendez-rubio-bill-reshaping-us-policy-in-eastern-mediterranean_-.

¹⁷ Mehmet Kanci, “ANALYSIS - To Encircle Turkey with an Energy Project: Transformation of East Med.” *Anadolu Agency*. 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-to-encircle-turkey-with-an-energy-project-transformation-of-east-med/1968544>.

¹⁸ Global Times, “Quad Mechanism Turning into ‘Sinister Gang of Indo-Pacific’: Global Times Editorial.” 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1234988.shtml>.

Alternative Explanations for Non-Alignment

There are several possible explanations for why China would not pursue alignment with Turkey on its maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The first explanation is that, in legal terms, China and Turkey are making fundamentally different legal claims and arguments. Regardless of whatever superficial similarities there are in terms of their behavior vis a vis other claimants, one could argue that there may be no basis in which both can make the same argument and support each other. Another explanation would have to do with Turkey's membership in NATO; for a number of reasons, Turkey's NATO membership could preclude alignment between Turkey and China on their respective maritime disputes. The third explanation that could be considered is that China's treatment of its Uighur population in Xinjiang acts as a significant wedge issue in bilateral relations between Turkey and China, preventing a close alignment on other issues of core interest.

I argue that these explanations are insufficient. In regard to NATO, during periods of time when China takes a more critical and confrontational stance toward the alliance such as in the early years of the Cold War, alignment with Turkey could have been used as a way for China to undermine the organization. This paper will later show that China actively encouraged Greece and Turkey from setting aside their disputes in order to preserve membership in NATO. However, this explanation does not account for Chinese thinking after the Cold War and today, during a period of renewed antipathy toward the organization.

In regard to the Uighur issue: Despite growing nationalism in Turkey and the increasing severity of Chinese policy towards its Muslim minority in Xinjiang, this issue seems to have been successfully compartmentalized amid increasing cooperation between Turkey and China. There were times in which Turkey spoke out vehemently against China on this issue, but there

does not seem to be any evidence in which China's perspective toward the Eastern Mediterranean was linked with Turkey's activism for Uighurs.

All of these explanations are important and worth considering in the course of this paper. Particularly important for the purposes of this paper is the first explanation, as it deals with the core of this paper's argument and provides an opportunity to undertake a necessary comparison of both disputes. In the next section, I critically compare both disputes in legal terms, but also holistically, to establish a basis for alignment that will be useful for further analysis in later sections of the paper.

CHAPTER 3. COMPARING DISPUTES

The specter of conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and its neighbors have prompted comparisons between the region and the South China Sea.¹⁹ Yet to date, there has been virtually no comprehensive comparative legal analysis of the disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean with those in the East and South China Sea.²⁰ Such a legal analysis is beyond the scope of this paper; instead, it incorporates legal concepts as necessary as part of a framework for a comparative analysis meant to illustrate Turkey and China’s relative positions in their respective regional disputes so as to evaluate whether there is a plausible basis for alignment.

Table 1. Comparison of China and Turkey in Respective Regional Maritime Disputes

Issue	China	Turkey
Legal Argument	Historical rights based on maps, writing and other historical evidence; “Nine-Dash Line.” ^{21 22}	Special features of the Aegean (many islands close to Turkish coast, constitute special circumstances). ²³ Islands do not have continental shelf and are not entitled to maritime territory.

¹⁹ For example, see: Gagaridis, Alessandro. “Rising Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean: Another South China Sea?” Geopolitical Monitor (blog), March 20, 2018. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/rising-tensions-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-another-south-china-sea/>; Institute for Maritime and Ocean Affairs. “Eastern Mediterranean Starting to Resemble Disputed South China Sea,” March 19, 2018. <https://www.imoa.ph/eastern-mediterranean-starting-resemble-disputed-south-china-sea/>; Will, Liam, “Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean: Turkey Clashes with Neighbors Over Offshore Gas Reserves.” *The Yale Review of International Studies (blog)*, November 18, 2020. <http://yris.yira.org/comments/4477>.

²⁰ Nicholas Ioannides conducted a preliminary legal comparison for his 2021 book, *Maritime Claims and Boundary Delimitation*. The unpublished section, which was originally meant to be included in Chapter 3 of his book, “Maritime Claims and Unilateral Activities in Undelimited Maritime Areas,” which was graciously shared by the author and its insights have been appropriated for this paper’s purposes.

²¹ The Commissioner's Office of China's Foreign Ministry in the Hong Kong S.A.R, “Beijing Has Case for ‘historic Rights’ at Sea,”

²² Note verbale dated 07 May 2009 from the Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General.

https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mysvnm33_09/chn_2009re_mys_vnm_e.pdf

²³ Stergios Arapoglou, “Dispute in the Aegean Sea the Imia/Kardak Crisis.” *Defense Technical Information Center*, April 1, 2002, <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA420639>.

Mode of Settlement	Bilateral negotiation based on “respecting historical facts,” and according “to international law;” ²⁴ Code of Conduct; “joint development.”	Bilateral negotiation based on “equitable principles,” and according to “all relevant circumstances.” ²⁵
Energy Exploitation	State-owned petroleum companies have a leading role in energy development. Seismic surveys in disputed areas, drilling, deployment of oil rig platforms.	State-owned petroleum companies have sole role in energy development. Seismic surveys in disputed areas; some exploratory drilling.
UNCLOS	Signatory to UNCLOS, yet refuses to decide “disputes concerning maritime delimitation” by compulsory arbitration. ²⁶	Not a UNCLOS signatory, and is a “persistent objector”; says claims align with spirit of customary law of the sea. ²⁷

Table 1 provides a useful framework in which to compare Turkey and China’s respective legal claims, and the tactics they use to assert those claims. In addition to the fact that Turkey is a non-signatory to UNCLOS whereas China is a signatory, their respective legal arguments appear to be fundamentally different and unique to their particular regional maritime disputes. China’s claim of ownership are based on its “historical rights” whereas Turkey claims that UNCLOS does not take into account the special geographic circumstances of semi-enclosed seas like the Aegean.

However, while there is no direct parallel in the Eastern Mediterranean with the “Nine-Dash line” in the South China Sea, and China does not accept Turkey’s novel interpretation of the continental shelf argument in international law, both countries have nevertheless endeavored to create similar *faits accomplis* energy exploration. For example, China conducted seismic surveys in the disputed Spratly islands and granted exploration licenses to China National

²⁴ “Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China on Settling Disputes Between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea Through Bilateral Negotiation.” June 8, 2016. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceth//eng/zgyw/t1370476.htm>.

²⁵ Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Background Note on Aegean Disputes,” Accessed April 12, 2022. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/background-note-on-aegean-disputes.en.mfa>.

²⁶ Ying, Fu. “Why China Says No to the Arbitration on the South China Sea.” *Foreign Policy (blog)*. July 10, 2016. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/10/why-china-says-no-to-the-arbitration-on-the-south-china-sea/>.

²⁷ Heinz-Jürgen Axt, “Troubled Water in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey Challenges Greece and Cyprus Regarding Energy Resources.” *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, May 26, 2021, 43. <https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-2006>.

Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) in 2014.²⁸ Whereas, from 2008 to 2012, Turkey granted exploration licenses to TPAO for blocks located in both Greece and Cyprus's maritime territory.

Furthermore, China and Turkey have further asserted their rights over disputed maritime areas by using warships and coast guard vessels to conduct law enforcement actions against vessels contracted by rival claimants. In addition to harassing research vessels conducting various activities in Cyprus's maritime area, in 2018, Turkish warships prevented the Saipem 12000, a drillship flying under the Italian flag, from conducting exploratory drilling in the Cypriot continental shelf.²⁹ Between 2010 and 2020, China's Coast Guard have been involved in a number of incidents against vessels operated by neighbors like Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, and have prevented drilling activities from taking place off of Vietnam's coast after threatening the use of force.^{30,31}

While paying lip-service to international law, China and Turkey aim to settle disputes through bilateral negotiations on their own terms, rather than resort to third-party mechanisms. For example, just as Turkey refused to appear before the Aegean Sea Continental Shelf case brought before the ICJ by Greece in 1976, and instead aired its views publicly, so did China refuse to appear before the *The Philippines v China* arbitration Tribunal and instead posted its views on a Position Paper published in 2014.^{32,33} However, China made a fairly big concession in

²⁸ China National Offshore Oil Corporation, "Notification of Part of Open Blocks in Waters Under Jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China Available for Foreign Cooperation in the Year of 2012," June 23, 2012, http://www.cnooc.com.cn/art/2014/9/25/art_6241_1148011.html

²⁹ Ioannides, 145-146.

³⁰ James Pearson, "Vietnam halts South China Sea oil drilling project under pressure from Beijing," *Reuters*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinesea-vietnam/vietnam-halts-south-china-sea-oil-drilling-project-under-pressure-from-beijing-idUSKBN1GZ0JN>

³¹ Bill Hayton, "South China Sea: Vietnam halts drilling after 'China threats,'" *BBC*, July 24, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40701121>

³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Position Paper of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines," December 7, 2014.

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/201412/t20141207_679387.html

³³ Aegean Sea Continental Shelf case (n 76).

2002, agreeing to sign the ASEAN-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, formally committing itself to finding a multilateral solution to the issue.³⁴

What Alignment Would Look Like

I argue that a plausible basis for an alignment exists between their shared preference for how to resolve the disputes, and antipathy towards third-party dispute mechanisms and external interference. In other words, China could argue that regional disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, like the internal affairs of a country, not to be subject to outside pressure or intervention.

While they may be coincidental and disconnected from each other, the shared challenge faced by both Turkey and China may not be lost on their leaders. For example, Cheng Enfu, an economic advisor to Xi Jinping, recently published an article arguing that Turkey and China are both facing the same “problems” in the Eastern Mediterranean and the South China Sea. “Due to the involvement of foreign countries outside the region,” Cheng argues, “such problems – which could have been solved through mutual negotiation – have been exacerbated so as to generate military conflict.” Turkey’s crucial place in China’s Maritime Silk Road, Cheng argues, could contribute to solutions with its neighbors, and in effect turn the Mediterranean “into a sea of peace and prosperity.”³⁵

However, having established a baseline for comparison and argued that such an alignment is plausible and possible, without determining the perspective and judgement of the Chinese themselves, everything is merely creative imagination.

³⁴ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. “A Fair and Effective Code of Conduct for the South China Sea,” July 1, 2015. <https://amti.csis.org/a-fair-and-effective-code-of-conduct-for-the-south-china-sea/>.

³⁵ Cheng Enfu, Li Jing, “The Global Status Quo and Future of Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative” 1, no. 4 (2020): 15.

CHAPTER 4: Détente, Deng, and the International Situation

China's relations with Turkey officially began in the early 1970s, coinciding with China's rapprochement and eventual normalization with the U.S. against the Soviet Union. At the same time, Turkey's own relationship with the West deteriorated significantly because of its dispute with Greece in the Aegean and as a consequence of its invasion with Cyprus. In order to understand why China never sought to promote solidarity with Turkey in its disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, which could have arguably provided a firm basis for Sino-Turkish relations against both the Soviet Union and the United States at the time, it is necessary to investigate to what extent China's leaders thought about the Eastern Mediterranean, and if they thought it was analogous to the disputes taking place in Asia at the same time. This section will seek to answer those questions by considering China's view of Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean, while also how it figured into the "general situation" of the world and China's overriding strategic interests at that time.

Turkey long figured into Chinese strategic calculations as a key country in the Cold War, owing in large part to proximity to both Europe and the Soviet Union. Following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, China pursued a broad-based policy of engagement with second-rank powers and countries in the third world.³⁶ *The Peking Review*, an English-language news magazine, took notice of this trend, publishing an article in March 1969 hailing anti-U.S. demonstrations which took place following a port visit by the U.S. Sixth Fleet.³⁷ The article decried U.S. imperialism for dragging Turkey "into the aggressive NATO bloc," though just a

³⁶ Michael Yahuda, "Strategic and International Politics Since Mao," in *Towards the End of Isolationism: China's Foreign Policy after Mao*, London: Macmillan Education UK, 1983, 20-21. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-17149-1_5

³⁷ "Turkish People's Struggle Against U.S. Imperialism – An Irresistible Torrent," *Peking Review*, March 7, 1969. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1969/PR1969-10.pdf>

few years later, in 1973, Mao and Zhou Enlai reportedly lectured Kissinger on the importance of keeping Turkey aligned against the Soviet Union.³⁸

From 1965, Turkey's trade ministry set out to establish economic relations with China despite its continued support for the Republic of China in Taiwan.³⁹ The first bilateral trade deal was signed between Turkey and China in 1969, and for a brief period of time Ankara simultaneously enjoyed economic relations with both the PRC and ROC. Turkey's balanced yet untenable position towards both governments was reflected at the UN by continuing to join the U.S. in vetoing annual resolutions that would recognize the PRC over the ROC, while at the same time supporting the PRC's membership alongside the ROC. However, after beginning talks with the PRC in May 1971, after just a few short months, Turkey established full diplomatic relations with Beijing and became the first country to close its Taipei embassy.⁴⁰

Laying the foundation for what would become China's regional strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean, China developed ties to Greece in parallel with Turkey. After President Nixon's visit to China in February 1972, diplomats from Greece and the PRC finalized full diplomatic relations the following May. There were a number of factors motivating Greece's move toward China, including the hope that it would alleviate Greece's diplomatic isolation (ruled by a military regime since 1967), benefits for the Greek economy, and the belief on the part of influential Greek diplomats like Christos Xanthopoulos-Palamas who believed that China was "equivalent with the two superpowers" and an "important factor in the international system."⁴¹

³⁸ Yahuda, "Strategic and International Politics Since Mao," 173.

³⁹ Selçuk Colakoğlu, "Turkey and China: Political, Economic, and Strategic Aspects of the Relationship," *World Scientific Publishing*, 2021, 13-15.

⁴⁰ Çolakoğlu, "Turkey And China: Political, Economic, And Strategic Aspects Of The Relationship" 18-19

⁴¹ Dionysios Chourchoulis, "Greece and the People's Republic of China in the Cold War, 1972–1989," in *Europe and China in the Cold War : Exchanges Beyond the Bloc Logic and the Sino-Soviet Split*. Brill, December 12, 2018. 66-67.

Greece's overall strategic calculations since the inter-war period had been fixated on the "menace to the north," but following Turkey's actions in the Aegean Sea in 1973 and the invasion of Cyprus in 1974, Greek foreign policy quickly evolved to account for "the new danger from the East."⁴² Turkey's invasion of Cyprus led to the collapse of the Greek junta and the rise to power of Konstantinos Karamanlis as Prime Minister of Greece. Faced with Turkish intransigence and unwillingness to negotiate a solution to events created by their own aggression, and given new space under conditions provided by détente, Karamanlis spearheaded a new multi-dimensional foreign policy. This included making accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) a priority; coupled with Greece's long-standing positive relations with the Middle East, Karamanlis self-consciously meant to make Greece, according to Foreign Minister Dimitris Bitsios, "an essential link between the Europeans and the Arabs," and in effect elevating its role in the international arena.⁴³

Both Greece and China pursued parallel diplomatic strategies in the Balkans region. Greece's aims were to engage with Balkan countries like Yugoslavia and Bulgaria as a way to balance and put pressure on Turkey. In June and July of 1975, Karamanlis emphasized Turkey's destabilizing position, and called on leaders like Josip Tito and Todor Zhizkov to intercede on Greece's behalf, apply pressure on Turkey to negotiate in good faith, and encourage it to take a reasonable position in disputes.⁴⁴ For China, entry into the Balkans meant access to rapidly industrializing states of Yugoslavia and Romania and a position in a region of the world that has historically been within the Soviet sphere of influence.⁴⁵ China's leaders took pains to

⁴² Lykourgos Kourkouvelas, "'Détente' as a Strategy: Greece and the Communist World, 1974–9," *The International History Review*, Vol. 35, No. 5 (October 2013), 1054.

⁴³ Kourkouvelas, "'Détente' as a Strategy: Greece and the Communist World, 1974–9," 1056.

⁴⁴ Minutes between Tito and Karamanlis, cited in "'Détente' as a Strategy: Greece and the Communist World, 1974–9."

⁴⁵ David Andelman, "China's Balkan Strategy," *International Security* 4, no. 3 (1979), 61 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2626694>.

emphasize, however, that China was too distant and weak to provide any significant defense. Hua Guofeng's emphasized this point in visits to Romania and Yugoslavia in 1978, by repeatedly quoting one of Zhou Enlai's aphorisms: "Distant waters do not quell fires."⁴⁶

For China's leaders like Hua and Deng Xiaoping, the overriding strategic logic expressed itself similarly in different regions that made up the Western front against the Soviet Union. Each region was a key section in a larger bulwark against Soviet imperialism and expansionism. Second, development of "friendly" relations with a broad range of countries, while explicitly withholding support against external forces. Third, emphasis on pragmatism, a major component of Dengist ideology, which in this case expressed itself in setting aside unproductive issue areas and focusing on mutual areas of cooperation.

A similar strategic outlook toward the Eastern Mediterranean meant shoring up NATO's southeastern flank. One of the main missions for the newly-established embassies in Greece and Turkey were to encourage both countries to maintain their commitment to the U.S. and NATO.⁴⁷ China's leaders and diplomats insisted that Turkey and Greece stay united in the face of Soviet imperialism and expansionism, arguing that such conflict played right into the designs of both superpowers bent on domination. While leading the Chinese delegation to the UN General Assembly in the fall of 1974, Deng Xiaoping himself encouraged Turkish officials to come to some agreement with Greece, or else the "big fishermen" would be the only ones to benefit.⁴⁸ Yet in both public statements at the UN and in private discussions with fellow leaders, even

⁴⁶ Andelman, "China's Balkan Strategy," 74.

⁴⁷ Nicholas Gage, "TURKS FEEL PRESSURE TO KEEP ROLE IN NATO," *The New York Times*, December 25, 1977. <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/12/25/archives/turks-feel-pressure-t0-keep-role-in-nato-unlikely-source-also.html>.

⁴⁸ Ezra F. Vogel, "Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China," Cambridge, MA & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 87.

refusing to specifically condemn Turkey after its invasion and occupation of Cyprus; the Greek embassy in Beijing characterized China's policy on Cyprus as a "policy of absence."⁴⁹

Karamanlis was no doubt aware of China's overriding concern for larger strategic priorities when he visited Beijing in November 1979.⁵⁰ When the topic of European integration came up in his meeting with Deng Xiaoping, Karamanlis emphasized how "Turkish hegemony" was destabilizing the Eastern Mediterranean. He explained how Turkey aimed to force the division of the Aegean waters by ignoring the territorial rights of Greece's islands. Putting it starkly, he explained that a solution could only be found in "dialogue, mediation, or war," but both sides could not find an agreement between themselves, and Turkey's leaders consistently avoided mediation through the International Court of Justice. According to Karamanlis, Turkey being unreasonable because of its own unstable domestic political situation.⁵¹

The two leaders also discussed the Cyprus issue. Deng had previously met Makarios III both before and after the coup, and evidently saw the problem as a major geopolitical problem in the Eastern Mediterranean and in NATO's Southeastern flank.⁵² Asked whether or not Greece was discussing the issue with Turkey, Karamanlis answered him by pointing out that Cyprus was not a bilateral issue to be solved between Greece and Turkey; Cyprus was its own independent

⁴⁹ DIAYE, London Embassy Series, File 4/3_1977, MFA to Embassies in Washington, London, Paris, Moscow and Greek Permanent Delegation in NATO, no. 1211/149/ AΣ 4625, Letter of Beijing Embassy on Chinese foreign policy, October 12, 1976, cited in Chourchoulis, 72.

⁵⁰ Quotations from this meeting are from a single document obtained from the Konstantinos G. Karamanlis Foundation, "Minutes of meeting between Prime Minister Karamanlis and Vice President Deng Xiaoping," File 52B.

⁵¹ Karamanlis was often frustrated by the fact that Turkey's unreasonable position in the Aegean and Cyprus stemmed, as he saw it, from its own unstable politics. See: "Memorandum of Conversation 1 Brussels, May 29, 1975, 9:30-10:45 a.m." National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-1977, Entry 5403, Box 23, Classified External Memoranda of Conversations, May-December 1975. *Secret Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976 Volume XXX Greece; Cyprus; Turkey, 1973-1976*. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/96610.pdf>

⁵² Joseph Lelyveld, "Peking Uses Round of Banquets To Show New Political Line-Up," *The New York Times*, May 27, 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/05/27/archives/peking-uses-round-of-banquets-to-show-new-political-line-up-visits.html>.

country. Interestingly, Karamanlis compared the situation in Cyprus to Cambodia. The latter had been invaded by Vietnam which caused the region to become destabilized, and prompted China to intervene militarily on Cambodia's behalf. Describing the situation in those terms, Karamanlis said that Cyprus would soon come up at the UN, and explicitly asked for Deng's help.

Throughout their conversation, Deng was sympathetic and understanding to Greece's plights in the Eastern Mediterranean. But he reiterated at length China's fundamental concerns about "war on a worldwide scale" and the Soviet Union's hegemonic ambitions and strategic aims, as China saw it, to stir up trouble in the East and attack in the West; to conquer the world, starting with Europe. Therefore, it was imperative to retain the strong capabilities of a united Europe. Deng explained their view that a strong Europe also included the Mediterranean, as well as the Middle East and some countries in North Africa.

Deng then delivered his position on both the Cyprus issue and the Aegean dispute. It is highly illustrative of the overall Chinese perspective toward such disputes, how it viewed itself vis-à-vis both Turkey and Greece, as well as the Eastern Mediterranean region as part of the overall international system. To evaluate its full effect, it is necessary to reproduce the full length of his relevant remarks:

Deng: As for the Cypriot issue, this is an issue with Turkey. We care about this region. But are far away and we are not in a position to contribute anything of a substance. You know our position on Cyprus, based on what we said at the UN. We cannot say much more, because we have almost the same friendly relations with you as with Turkey. We suggest these two friends talk while the Russians want to take advantage of your dispute.

Karamanlis: Russia pretends to be neutral.

Deng: Russia on the face of it is pretending to help, but in reality Russia is happy about the situation. Both of your countries have significant strategic value. You said we must have dialogue, and we believe that, even if it takes time. You mentioned the three solutions, and big efforts must be made on the first two.

Deng was similarly sympathetic about the Aegean dispute, but said that such problems exist around the world, and directly compared it to China's dispute with Japan in the East China Sea over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. He also pointed out that China had disagreements about the continental shelf with Korea, Philippines and Vietnam. "These are complex issues," he told Karamanlis, though it was clear that such local problems paled in comparison to global imperatives. "Many countries have such problems," Karamanlis said. "This is precisely why the international law of the sea is formed. The problems can be solved through dialogue or mediation. With the Turks we don't have one or the other."

Notably, Deng did not validate Karamanlis's stance based on the International Law of the Sea as a fellow signatory. Instead, he suggested a different course, modeled over Deng's own efforts in the past year to overcome China's dispute with Japan over the status of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.⁵³ This important exchange is also worth reproducing in full:

Deng: As for the Aegean, we don't know the situation very well. One time, a Turkish friend said that you have islands very close [to them] in the East. We believe in the inviolability of national territory. There cannot be doubts about [the demarcation of] territory. But you can negotiate about [its] economic exploitation.

⁵³ Deng Xiaoping visited Japan in October 1978 and again in February 1979. These historic visits aimed to form a basis for bilateral cooperation that would support Deng's Reform and Opening program and also bring Japan into an anti-Soviet coalition, particularly against Soviet allies in Asia such as Vietnam. See: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/deng-xiaoping-visits-tokyo-october-1978-and-february-1979>

Karamanlis: That's what we're saying. Greek sovereignty on the islands is based not only on history, but on international agreements as well. 60 years ago, we solved our disputes at Lausanne. Turkey agreed to the greekness of the islands. Therefore, there is no question of sovereignty anymore. However, the islands have their own economic rights.

Deng: We also have similar problems with Japan. Even if we are able to argue that a disputed island is an extension of China and therefore belongs to China, which is also supported by historical documents, the Japanese will insist that it is theirs. When I visited Japan, some Japanese reporter asked me about this. I answered, 'let's leave aside the question of ownership. We can discuss joint development instead.'

Karamanlis: There is a basic difference between the two situations. In our situation, there is no dispute about ownership. The Aegean islands are Greek.

Deng: I wanted to say that on certain points, a certain flexibility is possible.

The above exchange illustrates to a great extent the main aspects of China's policy towards the volatile Eastern Mediterranean region as part of its larger global strategic outlook during the Cold War. However, while this explains China's position in the 1970s, what explains China's continued reticence towards Eastern Mediterranean maritime disputes and its continued non-alignment with Turkey? In the next section, this paper will investigate China's strategy toward the Eastern Mediterranean today.

CHAPTER 5: CHINA'S STRATEGIC HEDGING TODAY

China's ties to the Eastern Mediterranean have increased and expanded up to the current day, primarily through the gradual cultivation of economic ties, a trend that has accelerated with China's economic rise and the global spread of the BRI. In addition to maintaining friendly relations with both Turkey, Greece and Cyprus, China has expanded and deepened its ties with other countries in the region.⁵⁴ In this section, I argue that China's strategic outlook towards the Eastern Mediterranean has evolved substantially since the 1970s, yet it has generally sought to strike a balance in its relations with Turkey and Greece, as two key avenues from East to West in its grand scheme to build global connectivity with China as its center. For this purpose, it has deliberately pursued a course of strategic hedging, which can be discerned by comparing China's involvement in BRI projects and regional energy initiatives with its conspicuous absence in other, more controversial regional energy initiatives.

Hedging has become a useful theoretical tool to describe state behavior guided by increasingly complex calculations of risk, interest, and priorities amid a more interconnected global system. Theorists use strategic hedging to describe behaviors which aim to find a balance between hard and soft balancing, and which avoid confrontation with the leading states.⁵⁵ It has also been argued that hedging behavior can be used by great powers to counter potential risks in case of uncertainty.⁵⁶ A major trend in China's foreign policy has been to deal with such

⁵⁴ For example, shortly after the Cold War, China normalized relations with Israel. See Doron Ella, Oded Oran, "After 30 Years of Ties, Israel, China Agree to Disagree," *The Jerusalem Post*, February 22, 2022. <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-695314>.

⁵⁵ Foot, "Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order," *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), Jan., 2006, Vol. 82, No. 1, Perspectives on Emerging Would-Be Great Powers (Jan., 2006).

⁵⁶ Medeiros, ES (2005), "Strategic hedging and the future of Asia-Pacific stability," *The Washington Quarterly* 29(1): 145–167.

uncertainty vis-à-vis the United States by pursuing a “prudent course of avoiding unduly antagonizing the United States while establishing a web of relationships with other states.”⁵⁷

Relevant to this discussion is recent research on China’s strategic hedging behavior in China’s economic diplomacy in the Persian Gulf.⁵⁸ For example, China enjoys positive relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, powers were previously pro-Western and enjoyed a good relationship, but which have become embroiled in a tense regional rivalry. China must chart a careful regional approach that’s broadly similar to the challenge posed by the Eastern Mediterranean; thus, it pursues a strategy based on economic diplomacy to secure its vital national interests without being pulled to either power’s side, and to steer clear of seeming to threaten or displace the U.S.’s role as primary security guarantor in the region. The authors point out that, with Saudi Arabia being China’s second biggest fuel supplier in after Russia, and Iran in the seventh position, China’s vital national interests depend on its ability to craft such a well-calibrated hedging strategy.⁵⁹

Similarly, one can presume that China would pursue a similarly deliberate strategy to maximize its influence in the region without upsetting the balance it has struck between Greece and Turkey since the 1970s. Both countries remain key components in China’s larger geo-economic strategy which seeks to develop interconnectivity between regions and continents. Greece, for instance, is a key component of BRI’s Maritime Silk Road, alternatively described as

⁵⁷ Foot, 93.

⁵⁸ Jeremy Garlick, Radka Havlová, “China’s ‘Belt and Road’ Economic Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf: Strategic Hedging amidst Saudi–Iranian Regional Rivalry,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, January 30, 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1868102619898706>.

⁵⁹ World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) “China fuels imports by country 2017,” *World Bank and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)*, 2019. https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/CHN/Year/LTST/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/by-country/Product/27-27_Fuels

“a shining pearl along the Belt and Road” and a “pearl of the Mediterranean.”⁶⁰ The second track is through the Silk Road Economic Belt which passes through Turkey, and which in 2017 was explicitly aligned with Turkey’s own Middle Corridor project which aimed to transform the country into a trans-regional transportation and logistics hub.⁶²

Table 2. Involvement and Non-Involvement in Eastern Mediterranean Energy Projects

Energy Projects/Initiatives	Chinese Involvement/Non-Involvement
Gas/oil blocks.	Chinese were reportedly interested in gas blocks in Israel, Cyprus EEZ; no involvement. ⁶³ Chinese were reportedly interested in Israel gas blocks; no involvement.
East Med Pipeline	No Involvement
East Med Gas Forum	No Involvement
Limassol LNG Terminal	Leading investor in international consortium. ⁶⁴
EuroAsia Interconnector	State Grid Corporation owns stake. ⁶⁵
Renewable energy projects	Wind farms in Crete; 50 MW Concentrated Solar Processor (CSP) facility.

In contrast to numerous, high-profile BRI projects throughout the region, there is a conspicuous absence of Chinese involvement in regional energy initiatives that have taken place in recent years. Table 2 provides a quick overview of the major regional energy projects and initiatives as a way to show only limited involvement in energy development, and complete lack of involvement in programs that would put China at odds with Turkey.

⁶⁰ Xinhua, “Opening a New Era of China-Greece Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” *People’s Daily*, November 12, 2019. <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/11/12/c90000-9631584.html>.

⁶¹ Xinhua, “Chinese Naval Fleet Arrives in Greece for Friendly Visit,” *People’s Daily*, July 24, 2017. <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/07/24/c90786-9245366.html>.

⁶² CGTN, “China Pledges to Align Belt and Road Initiative with Turkey’s Middle Corridor,” June 15, 2018. https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514d3155544d78457a6333566d54/share_p.html.

⁶³ “China’s CNOOC in Cyprus Talks with Delek and Noble - Globes,” June 19, 2014.

<https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-chinas-cnooc-in-cyprus-talks-with-delek-and-noble-energy-1000947553>.

⁶⁴ Xinhua, “LNG Terminal Constructed by Chinese Company ‘Biggest Ever Energy Project’ in Cyprus: President,” July 20, 2021. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-07/10/c_139201233.htm.

⁶⁵ State Grid Corporation of China, “Shu Yinbiao Met Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras To Discuss on Accelerating the Building EuroAsia Interconnector to Promote the Development of Greek Energy and Power Industry,” May 13, 2017.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170615112203/http://www.sgcc.com.cn/ywlm/mediacenter/corporatenews/05/340048.shtml>

This is entirely in line with what one would expect such a hedging strategy to resemble. It makes sense, for example, that China has not been involved in either surveying or drilling in disputed waters, despite reportedly being interested in them. Chinese officials would recognize the pitfalls based on their own experience in the South China Sea, in which China and rival claimants have long tried to involve foreign energy companies as a means to strengthen their maritime claims.⁶⁶ This tactic is similarly used in the Eastern Mediterranean. Cyprus, for example, has sought to involve energy corporations as part of a strategy to construct an “energy shield of interests” as a means to entrench its state sovereignty over maritime territory against Turkish aggression.⁶⁷

China’s absence in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) and the East Med Pipeline is also conspicuous. Although the East Med Pipeline is the sort of project that would cohere to BRI’s stated aims to promote regional interconnectivity, and China’s long-standing interest in maintaining a presence in regional institutions, China’s absence can be interpreted to be because of Turkish opposition.⁶⁸ The EMGF is an inclusive organization, but Turkey is excluded from the organization as result of its non-recognition of Cyprus.⁶⁹ The organization was

⁶⁶ Jennings, Ralph, “How Foreign Oil Drillers Are Helping Consolidate China’s Claims in Disputed Asian Sea,” *VOA*, December 16, 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/a/how-foreign-oil-drillers-are-helping-consolidate-china-claims-in-disputed-asian-sea/6357751.html>; “Exxon’s South China Sea Oil Project Tests Chinese Influence.” September 23, 2019. <https://www.worldoil.com/news/2019/9/23/exxon-s-south-china-sea-oil-project-tests-chinese-influence>; in the early 1970s, U.S. officials described how the Marcos regime was selling energy exploration contracts to foreign companies as “deliberate Philippine design” to strengthen claims in the disputed Spratlys. See Muscolino, “Past and Present Resource Disputes in the South China Sea: The Case of Reed Bank,” 85.

⁶⁷ Neoklis Sylikiotis, “Energy Strategy to the Benefit of Cyprus and the Cypriot People,” *EURODIALOGUE*, Volume 4, *CYPRUS GAS RESOURCES AND GEOPOLITICAL GAMES*, January 5, 2017, https://issuu.com/eleni_theocharous/docs/natural_gas_journal_no4_web; As Interior Minister, Sylikiotis also reported that China’s CNOOC was interested in acquiring exploration licenses for Cypriot gas deposits. It can be argued that revealing this information to news outlets was a way to involve China in Cypriot claims.

⁶⁸ Scott Morris et al., “Mapping China’s Participation in Multilateral Development Institutions and Funds,” *Center for Global Development*, November 18, 2021. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/mapping-chinas-participation-multilateral-development-institutions-and-funds>.

⁶⁹ Nael M. Shama, “Gas and Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean,” *Atlantic Council*, February 19, 2019. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/energysource/gas-and-conflict-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>

conceived as a way to coordinate regional development of gas, and also to promote the flagship EastMed Pipeline, a project proposed to connect gas fields between Cyprus and Israel to Europe via Greece, undermining Turkey's own strategic efforts to export gas to Europe through its own network of transnational pipelines.⁷⁰

China's main concerns must be over the political risk entailed in the above-described projects, as they have not shied away from being involved in large-scale projects that are considerably less controversial. China's involvement in renewable energy projects in Greece, a major LNG terminal that Cyprus President Anastasiades called "an ambitious project of strategic importance and of national dimensions," and a EuroAsia Interconnector meant to connect the electricity grid of Israel and Cyprus to that of Greece, and by extension Europe.⁷¹ This type of involvement not only avoids Turkish anger, but it aligns well with American objectives in the region, which has centered on energy diplomacy through the development of renewables, LNG terminals, and – after withdrawing support for the East Med Pipeline – continued support for the EuroAsia Interconnector.⁷²

Overall, China's hedging strategy seems to be a strategic success. Not only has China continued to deepen its strategic relationships Greece, Turkey and Cyprus without taking clear sides in their maritime disputes, this has even paid political dividends in its own maritime disputes. Ironically, the support has not come from Turkey, but from Greece. Following China's legal defeat over its claims in the South China Sea in 2016, the EU released a relatively weak

⁷⁰ Gürel, Ayla, and Laura Le Cornu, "Turkey and Eastern Mediterranean Hydrocarbons," 50.

⁷¹ *Xinhua*, "LNG Terminal Constructed by Chinese Company 'Biggest Ever Energy Project' in Cyprus: President," July 20, 2021.

⁷² Vassilis Nedos, "US Signals Energy Shake-up in East Med," *EKathimerini*, January 12, 2022. <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1175273/us-signals-energy-shake-up-in-east-med/>; U.S. "energy diplomacy" is analyzed here: "The United States in the East Med: A Case Study in Energy Diplomacy," *CSIS*, November 9, 2019. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-east-med-case-study-energy-diplomacy>.

statement, encouraging all claimants to reach resolutions “through peaceful means, to clarify their claims and pursue them in respect and in accordance with international law.”⁷³

Greek Foreign Minister Kotzias claimed credit for the result, and specifically for “improvements” that underscored the role of UNCLOS. Undoubtedly channeling frustration over the “double-standard” in Western criticism towards China and reticence toward Turkish behavior, Kotzias’ statement also stated that “all of the countries that are candidates for EU membership need to expressly accept the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and to have a binding commitment to join this convention and implement it.”⁷⁴

This support has not seemingly been reciprocated by the Chinese side. In 2020, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis met with Yang Jiechi and delivered a long litany of Ankara’s “illegal activity” and “irrational behaviors,” and said that he planned to soon bring these issues up at the United Nations.⁷⁵ For his part, Yang responded by focusing on deepening Chinese and Greek relations along the lines of development, and only said that China was “monitoring developments in the Eastern Mediterranean.” The Chinese readout of the meeting, notably, did not mention disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean at all, even as a topic of conversation.⁷⁶ Arguably, Mitsotakis made much less headway than Karamanlis did with Deng.

⁷³ Robin Emmott, “EU’s Statement on South China Sea Reflects Divisions,” *Reuters*. July 15, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-ruling-eu-idUSKCN0ZV1TS>

⁷⁴ Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Minister Kotzias’ Statement on the EU Announcement Regarding the Ruling of the Court of Arbitration on the South China Sea,” July 15, 2016. <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/foreign-minister-kotzias-statement-on-the-eu-announcement-regarding-the-ruling-of-the-court-of-arbitration-on-the-south-china-sea.html>.

⁷⁵ “Meeting of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis with Yang Jiechi, Member of the Political Bureau and Director of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China,” September 4, 2020. <https://primeminister.gr/en/2020/09/04/24714>.

⁷⁶ “Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi Visits Greece,” *Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America*, September 5, 2022, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceus/eng/zgyw/t1815035.htm>.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In seeking to answer the question why China has not aligned itself with Turkey on maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse in the field of international relations and China studies about China's strategic intentions in the world, the role of its influence in certain regions of the world, and in particular the sort of norms and realignments that it might seek to build in order to prepare for new shifts in global power and leadership. For American policymakers concerned about the overall trajectory of U.S.-Turkish relations, especially in the context about NATO and its future in a changing world order, this analysis may also prove timely. It may also be the case the current preoccupation with China and the Indo-Pacific may lead observers to increasingly see other regions of the world, like the Eastern Mediterranean, in analogous terms, and seek to draw comparisons and areas of interconnection. In that case, this paper may be one of the first

In undertaking a comparative analysis of both the East Mediterranean and South China Sea disputes, this paper first finds that such an alignment is plausible. Based on the similarities that can be drawn from Turkey and China's motives, responses and preferred solutions in their respective regional disputes, one can fairly imagine a situation in which both explicitly support the other in advocating against American or Western interventionism in regional disputes and advocating for solutions based on principles of fairness, respect and sensitivity to unique conditions. The reason why this is has not taken place can be found in China's overall strategic assessment of the world at the time in which it began developing ties with Turkey, Greece, and other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean region. The overall trajectory since then as evolved, with China's increasing economic influence and power, and the global transition from Cold War

balances of power to interconnectivity and multipolarity, to what is becoming de rigueur for states in such a situation – to engage in strategic hedging.

This general stance towards Turkey and its problems in the Eastern Mediterranean are not likely to change, as such a strategy has at this point become entrenched over the last several decades, and other powers are expected to remain the primary security guarantors in the region going forward. Yet while smaller, less powerful countries in these regions may opt to go out into the world and build coalitions, and seek the support of powerful countries outside of their own neighborhoods, Turkey and China seem unconcerned about what external powers say, and aim to carry on in their neighbors as they see fit.

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