

The natural gas dispute in the Aegean Sea

Germany must stop the arming of the Turkish navy

Turkey is receiving the exact weapons it needs for a military conflict with Greece. This is an outrage.

A guest editorial by Sevim Dagdelen

The dispute over the exploitation of natural gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean ostensibly threatens open war between Turkey and Greece. The cynical staircase joke of history: should it come to an armed conflict, German submarines made by Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems are likely to make an attack on an EU member possible. Despite the aggressive foreign policy pursued by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey has been a top importer of German military equipment for years. In 2018, war materiel worth 243 million Euros was delivered to the Bosphorus, and in 2019 for 345 million Euros. And the delivery permits issued in the past seven months lead us to expect new record figures for this year.

Meanwhile, the Turkish president conjures up the glory and greatness of the Ottoman Empire. But whoever goes down in history in such a way, unwittingly awakens memories of the long lasting decline as a the " sick man on the Bosphorus". If there is one thing that can be regarded as a diagnosis for the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it is the enormous over-extension.

If one takes a look at the map of the Ottoman Empire from the 18th century, one will surely be surprised by the multitude of places which President Erdogan these days has transformed into landmarks of his Neo-Ottoman foreign policy. And quite successfully so: in the Syrian Idlib, the al-Qaeda fighters who represent his interests there now pay with Turkish lira, in the north of Iraq the de facto annexations are progressing steadily and in Libya, as in Somalia and Qatar, Turkish military bases are being erected.

Meanwhile, the Turkish lira is in free fall - precisely because of Turkish military interventions and breaches of international law, which are very costly and scare off investors. Erdogan plays the game of vabanque; a risky choice where he puts everything at stake, and can lose everything, or gain an equal amount. According to estimates, one third of the world's natural gas reserves are located in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, and that's where he is vying for, indeed, he has to, if only to be able to cash in to cover his uncovered bills. That is the reason for the evocation of the faded glory of the former world empire. This is why Erdogan wants to tear up the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which defines the borders of modern day Turkey. However, according to international law in force, other states, including Egypt, Israel, Lebanon and Syria, as well as the EU members Greece and Cyprus, can claim the right to exploit the economic resources of much of the eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, Erdogan is left only with an escalation of the confrontation: an attack by Turkey on Greece and Cyprus is becoming increasingly likely.

The supply of German submarines and German assistance in establishing Turkey's own naval industry is now invaluable to Erdogan. The Turkish exploration ships in Greek waters are nothing but the vanguard of his war armada. Erdogan is waiting. His provocations are aimed at a military action by the Greeks, which would then serve as a pretext for a Turkish attack on the Greek islands, on tiny Kastellorizo first, and thusly, get hold of a lion's share of the gas resources.

German and European foreign policy is completely clueless in the face of this aggression. For years, Erdogan has been playing with fire by sending his reconnaissance ships into the waters of EU member Cyprus. The EU subsequently imposed entry bans and asset freezes on two people allegedly involved in the drilling. Whoever acts in this manner does not take themselves seriously and is of of course not taken seriously either. Whilst the European Union took these ridiculous measures, Turkey remained a candidate for EU membership, and the EU Customs Union gave it further privileged market access. Most serious, however, are and remain the continuing arms supplies; after the attack on the Kurds in Syria in 2019 "exclusively for the maritime sector", as Foreign Minister Heiko Maas likes to emphasise, i.e. exactly where Erdogan needs them most urgently.

If Germany and the EU do not act now with an immediate comprehensive arms freeze for Turkey, the freezing of economic and financial aid and the suspension of the customs union, Erdogan's appetite will grow even bigger. Then no phone call to the palace of the would-be Sultan, no matter how pleading, will help.

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Original: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/erdgasstreit-in-der-aegaeis-deutschland-muss-die-aufruetzung-der-tuerkischen-marine-stoppen/26092262.html>