

Turkey and Greece Are Talking Again

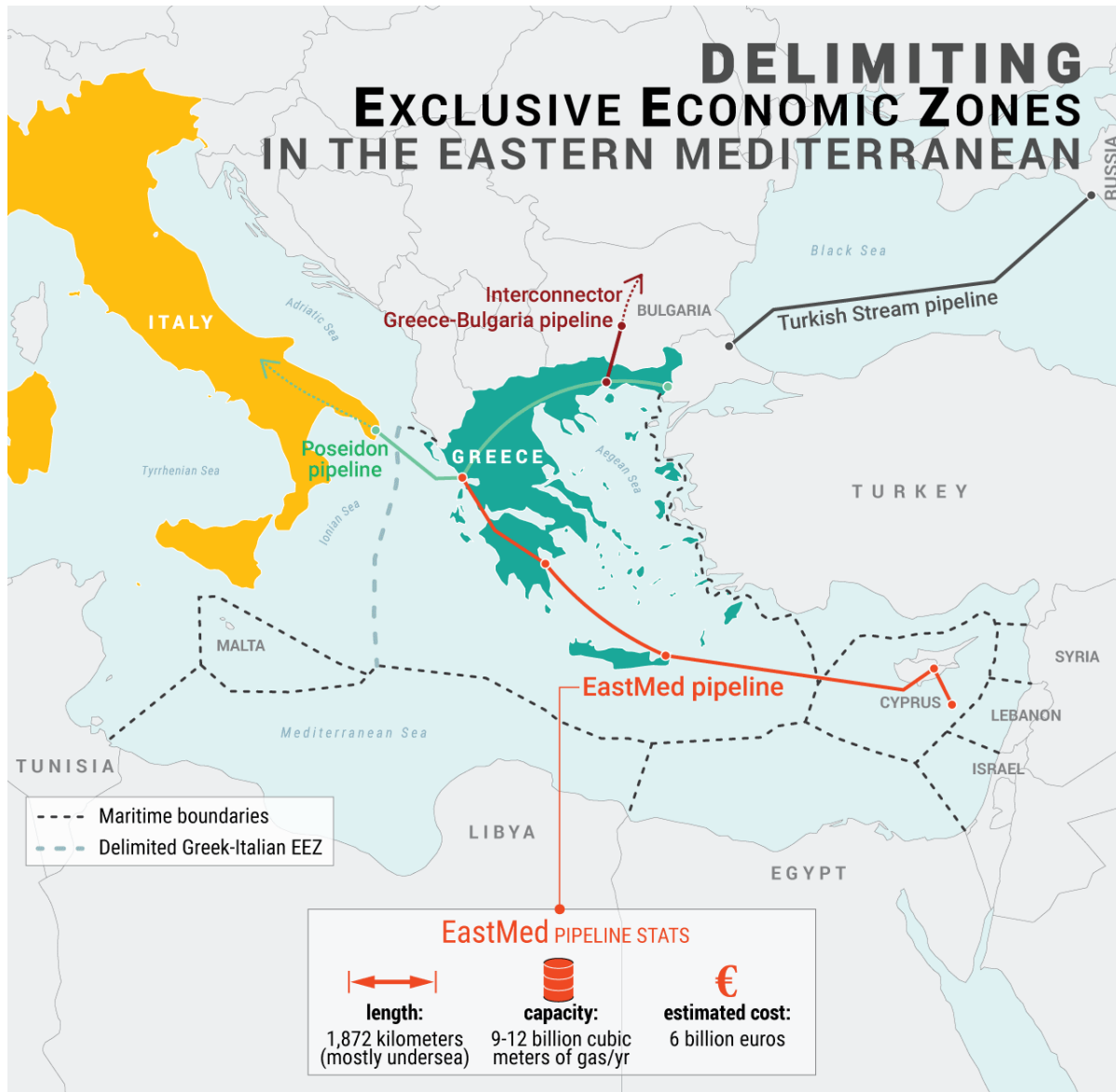
by **Caroline D. Rose** - December 4, 2023

The war between Israel and Hamas is testing relationships throughout the Middle East and beyond, but a short distance away two historical enemies, Greece and Turkey, are rapidly making amends. Building upon months of diplomacy, senior Greek and Turkish officials, including Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, will meet in Athens on Dec. 7. Judging from the public agenda, nothing will be off the table. But Athens and Ankara have tried several times in recent years to put their relationship on a more stable footing, and there is little reason to expect a sustainable breakthrough this time either.

Historical Rivalry

In just the past half-century, the Greek and Turkish armed forces have had several close calls. The most intense episode involved the small Mediterranean island of Cyprus, where in 1974 Turkish troops intervened after Greece orchestrated a military coup. The island was split into Greek- and Turkish-speaking areas, with the latter governed by the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and backed by Ankara. Though the Cypriot government, Greece and the international community do not recognize the TRNC, Turkey has explored the territorial waters around Cyprus for natural gas and regularly deploys its warships in the area, at least in part for leverage against Greece and the European Union.

In 2010, the countries set up a high-level cooperation council to reduce tensions and hash out their disagreements. But despite meeting in 2013, 2014 and 2016, the council failed to settle differences over trade, the rights to explore and develop gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean, militarization of Aegean islands, the 2015 migration crisis and, of course, Cyprus. The council did not convene again after 2016.



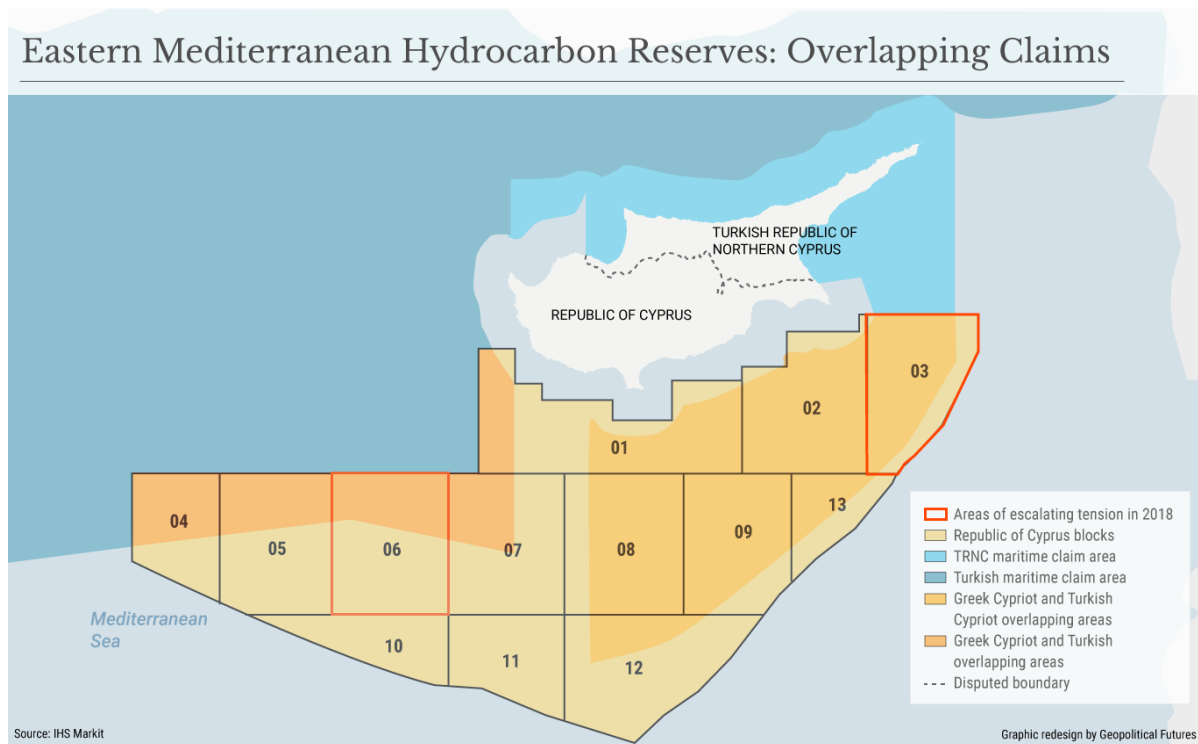
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Relations hit another low in 2020, when Turkey dispatched a seismic research vessel to explore a gas field in disputed waters just off the northern coast of Cyprus. Fearing a Turkish fait accompli, Greece and sympathetic Mediterranean stakeholders (Egypt, Israel, France and Italy) set up the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum to coordinate exploration, production and investment – without Turkey’s participation. Meanwhile, the Turkish government challenged the existing maritime boundaries (established by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne) through the amplification of **its Blue Homeland policy** and the signing of a bilateral agreement with one of Libya’s two rival governments

to redraw their maritime borders in a way more favorable to Ankara. More recently, Greece has lobbied the U.S. Congress not to sell advanced F-16 fighter jets to Turkey, which for years has been eager to modernize its air force.

Inflection Points

Despite this tumultuous history, circumstances are pushing Greece and Turkey to give reconciliation another go. For Ankara, the main factor is the economy. Inflation in Turkey has skyrocketed, with the central bank predicting year-end inflation as high as 65 percent. Changes in leadership at the Finance Ministry and the central bank and a dramatic swing toward conventional monetary policy have not yet brought inflation to heel. The result is rising political pressure on Erdogan and greater risks for Turkey in pressing its maritime territorial claims.



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In Greece's case, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum's EastMed pipeline has largely folded due to soaring costs and a lack of political momentum. Collaboration has been further hindered by opposition to Israel's conduct and objectives in its military offensive in Gaza. Without the united support of its partners in the gas forum, Greece is severely weakened in its ability to challenge Turkish gas exploration and militarization in the eastern Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, the countries' shared experience of natural disasters in 2023 has served as an opportunity to work together. In February, a 7.8-magnitude earthquake in Turkey killed more than 50,000 people and caused approximately \$84 billion in damage. Then in the summer, amid one of the longest heatwaves in Greek history, some 80 wildfires throughout Greece destroyed an estimated 161,000 hectares, killed 28 people and caused nearly \$2 billion in damage. Finally, in September, flash flooding in both countries killed a handful of people. Policymakers on both sides responded with a push to rekindle cooperation over climate-related disasters.

Finally, the passage of elections has helped to bring down the temperature. Both Erdogan and Mitsotakis were up for re-election in 2023. The Turkish race was especially close. Neither leader felt confident pursuing rapprochement during their campaigns, concerned that nationalist rivals might outflank them. But with elections behind them, Ankara and Athens can again explore a new approach toward their relationship. The first step came at the summer's NATO summit in Vilnius, where Erdogan and Mitsotakis met on the sidelines and agreed on a roadmap to revive the bilateral high-level council.

Obstacles to Long-Lasting Peace

The first meeting of the council in December will likely try to establish confidence-building measures to build momentum for subsequent talks on the stickiest issues. But the historical evidence suggests that progress will break down once the topic of Cyprus is introduced. Greece and Cyprus will not formally recognize the TRNC, and Turkey will not cut ties with the Turkish Cypriots. Without more fundamental changes in the status quo, this latest attempt at reconciliation is likely to yield only fleeting success.

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