

CYPRIOT SEARCH FOR NATURAL GAS AND TURKISH THREATS

A RE-EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT OF POWER

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In September 2011 a minor crisis tested the Cypriot planning for the exploitation of maritime natural gas reserves. This crisis was generated by the intentions of an American firm - licensed by the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) - to start an exploratory drilling in the ROC's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in search for natural gas and Turkey's threats against the commencement of the drilling works, disputing the ROC's sovereignty over its EEZ. This disregard of the Turkish threats by the RoC challenges Thucydides' axiom that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must".¹

The story

On September 19th Noble Energy, after having signed a contract with the RoC for drilling and exploitation of hydrocarbons in block 12 of the Cypriot EEZ, began an exploratory drilling in search of natural gas reserves. This development took place amidst threats that Turkey would react by mobilizing its warships in case the drilling began. A statement made by Turkey's Minister of EU Affairs Egemen Bagis on September 2, 2011 that the Greek Cypriot searches are 'illegal' and that Turkey will make use of 'all its rights' and that the former should not forget what they suffered in the past when they tried to do 'similar things' is indicative of the Turkish strategy. Following a journalist's question whether Turkey would mobilize its fleet, Bagis replied that "this is why we built our fleet and trained our soldiers". Other Turkish political elite made related statements, including the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.² Turkish high-ranking officials had set forth a strategy of vague threats, implying the possibility of use of military force in case the RoC did not postpone the procedures, expecting the Cypriot government to yield before the risk of a military confrontation. Turkish officials may have expected that the RoC would react as it did in December 1998 when former President Glafkos Klerides decided to postpone the reception of S300 Russian anti-aircraft missiles his government had purchased, as a result of (direct) Turkish threats of a military strike and intensive pressure by Greece and the United States.³ The current Turkish threats had caused anxiety and ambiguity over

¹ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1950, 403.

² <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/turkey-rattles-sabres-over-cypriot-natural-gas-drilling>, November 1, 2012.

³ "Sychroni Apopsi" magazine, Issue 8, p.p. 44-65. -in Greek.

<http://magazine.apopsi.com.cy/2008/12/periechomena-tefchous-dekemvriou-2008/>, November 8, 2011.

Turkey's real intentions and is not a coincidence that the international media wondered "how far Turkey is prepared to escalate tensions".⁴

In the end, and despite the presence of the Turkish fleet in the area, no use of force was made, either in block 12 or elsewhere. The RoC did not yield to the Turkish threats and the drilling works began according to schedule as per the agreement with Noble Energy. A few days after Noble Energy's drilling machine set to work, Turkish officials started receding. Instead of insisting on threats, Turkish leadership shifted towards a plan B: It signed a "continental shelf deal" for oil and gas research and exploitation with the pseudo-state's "authorities" in occupied Cyprus. In this context, a few months later, Turkish Petroleum Company (TPAO) began exploratory drilling works in occupied Cyprus, near Famagusta, as a form of retaliation action towards the RoC's actions.⁵

Power Indicators

If Thucydides' axiom is valid, then why - in the case under examination - did the weak party defy the strong one's will? Our hypothesis is that Cyprus was not the weak party, despite Turkey's vast comparative advantage in terms of hard power. Indeed, Turkey's hard power advantage was not an applicable power indicator to be mobilized in this case; on the contrary, the attributes of the crisis rendered the RoC's power indicators more effective. Evaluating the two parties' power indicators will elucidate the aforementioned argument.

Turkey's demand for postponement of the drilling was mainly based on its naval supremacy. Turkey possesses a significant number of military vessels, including 19 frigates and 16 submarines.⁶ The Turkish naval capabilities dwarf those of the RoC, a lilliput state which essentially has no means of reaction to the Turkish fleet, especially in distant waters. However, Turkey's most important comparative advantage is not military supremacy *per se*, but its prestige, namely the credibility of its threat.⁷ Regarding the Cyprus-Turkish relations, Turkish prestige is defined by widespread perceptions of its hard power supremacy, as well as by the Greek Cypriot fears of a potential repetition of the catastrophe of 1974, amplified by the precedent of the abovementioned S300 missile defence case. By stating or hinting that Turkey would consider the use of its military means in case Cyprus proceeded with drilling, Turkish officials tried to exploit their country's prestige (and the Cypriot perceptions of it).

⁴ <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/turkey-rattles-sabres-over-cypriot-natural-gas-drilling>, November 1, 2012.

⁵ http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=278643, November 7, 2012.

⁶ http://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=Turkey, November 1, 2012.

⁷ Gilpin, R., *War and Change in International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 31.

On the other hand, the RoC possessed four power indicators which were much more applicable than Turkey's hard power supremacy and threat credibility and subsequently much more effective: First, is the delimitation agreement with Israel and the steadily flourishing relations with the neighboring country. Block 12 neighbors with Israeli Leviathan and Tamar fields, which means that any Turkish intentions of using military force (or intensify naval presence) would risk confrontation with Israeli navy. Given the disturbed Turkish-Israeli relations since the flotilla incident of May 2010 in Gaza such a confrontation would have been extremely perilous for both countries.

Second, the Greek declaration of active support. Despite its severe financial problems, Greece declared its readiness to support the RoC in case of a Turkish military strike. This was made clear through a statement of the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, Stavros Lambrianides, in an interview to Greek newspaper *Eleftherotypia* on September 18, one day before the commencement of the drilling works.⁸

Third, the international acknowledgment of the ROC's right to drill. Cyprus was acting according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,⁹ making use of its right to exploit natural resources lying within its EEZ. Thus, the international community could not disregard the RoC's right without undermining international law. In this context, the United States, the EU, Germany, France and Russia officially took the RoC's side by publicly acknowledging its right to proceed with the drilling.¹⁰ Moreover, the fact that the company which was due to conduct the drilling was an American one, complicated things for Turkey. Simply put, it seems inconceivable for a Turkish warship to strike a platform with an American flag on it. Such a blunt provocation against the most powerful state in the world carries significant cost even for a powerful state like Turkey.

Thucydides was right, but...

The RoC was effectively protected by a "safety zone" composed by international agreements and statements of support, international law provisions and potential regional implications, all of which increased the risk and cost for Turkey if it decided to proceed with military threats and actions. Turkey could have defied the Cypriot "safety zone" and materialize the threats. In fact, such a contingency cannot be excluded in a respective future crisis. However, in the case under examination, Turkey estimated that use of force would be more costly than beneficial. This is a clear indication that hard power is not always enough for a state to pursue its goals. With this in mind, Thucydides was right albeit we should always

⁸ <http://www.enet.gr/?i=issue.el.home&date=18/09/2011&id=310575>, November 8, 2012 –in Greek.

⁹ http://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/closindx.htm, November 8, 2012.

¹⁰ <http://www.imerisia.gr/article.asp?catid=26509&subid=2&pubid=112101277>, November 8, 2012 –in Greek.

interpret his work within a wider context taking into consideration all the relevant variables.