

EQUITY VERSUS LEGALITY IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: THE MAVI VATAN DOCTRINE AND TURKEY'S OBJECTION OF UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE LAW OF THE SEA (UNCLOS)

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ABSTRACT

Since the 2010s, following the discovery of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean, energy disputes in the region have intensified, rekindling tensions between Turkey and its neighbors, Greece and Cyprus, and bringing to light divergences regarding the application of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This article therefore seeks to analyze how the Blue Homeland Doctrine (Mavi Vatan), articulated alongside the Neo-Ottoman Doctrine and the Energy Security Strategy presented by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a tool of power projection, underpins the revisionism characteristic of Erdoğan's government. Situated within the fields of Geopolitics and International Security, the article adopts a qualitative approach, based on specialized literature review and documentary analysis of international treaties. It argues that the Turkish position constitutes a structured contestation of the legal order established by UNCLOS (1982), going beyond a merely expansionist naval strategy. In this context, Turkey has invoked the Principle of Equity in response to the application of international law as established by the maritime convention. The conclusion is that the situation reveals deep tensions between international legality, historical perceptions of territorial injustice, and the reconfiguration of the regional balance of power, transcending disputes over energy resources. e: Turquia; Pátria Azul; Chipre; Grécia; Mediterrâneo.

Keywords: Türkiye; Blue Homeland; Cyprus; Greece; Mediterrean.

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INTRODUCTION

Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus were once part of the same empire: the Ottoman Empire. After World War I, this empire was defeated and subsequently divided. Greece, however, had been the first to achieve its independence in the 19th century, when the Ottoman Empire was already showing signs of decline. Supported by the United Kingdom, Greece gained autonomy in 1830. Cyprus, following a similar path, came under British administration in 1878 and remained so until 1960. As for Turkey, it became the main heir to the legacy of this grand Muslim and military empire.

The shared history among these countries leaves marks, resentments, and disputes, which today translate into common strategic interests within the same geographic area: the Mediterranean.

The importance of the Mediterranean is historical, attracting the interests and ambitions of different powers over the years by serving as a point of connection between Europe, Africa, and Asia. For centuries, it represented a vital route for navigation and one of the main pathways to India. Once overlooked, the Mediterranean has returned as a focal point of disputes and geopolitical rivalries, serving as a stage for the reconfiguration of alliances and the projection of power by regional powers, especially the three countries in question.

With a shared past and the fragmentation of an empire humiliated by treaties imposed by victorious European powers, unequal territorial and maritime divisions remain open wounds, erupting into real disputes among Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey, not only in the Mediterranean but also in surrounding seas.

Particularly after the discovery of significant gas reserves off the coast of Cyprus in recent years (from 2011 onwards), disputes between Turkey and Greece/Cyprus have intensified, leading to a scenario of "Gunboat Diplomacy," where a country's naval power is visibly used to coerce and assert claims, thereby deterring adversaries from operating in areas of interest.

An attempt to define maritime domains and their limits came with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982 (UNITED NATIONS, 1982). This multilateral treaty, often referred to as the "Constitution of the Oceans," sought to establish a comprehensive

legal framework, defining the rights and responsibilities of states to avoid further disputes.

Although it was not created to resolve any specific conflict, UNCLOS (1982) aimed to address converging pressures in shared regions, resolve latent conflicts, and cope with a technological revolution that had rendered previous maritime law obsolete and unsustainable. Before its existence, the Law of the Sea was primarily based on customary law (state practices recognized as law) and some 1958 conventions, which no longer reflected reality. Thus, there was no universal and coherent regime.

Turkey is not a signatory to this agreement, while Cyprus and Greece are. Signing UNCLOS would mean that Turkey would have to abandon its disputes in the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas, as well as recognize Greek control over Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone, since most of the island is governed by the Greek-Cypriot administration.

Under Erdogan's government, Turkey has been undergoing a phase of reconfiguring its foreign policy and geopolitical strategies, as the country experienced a long period of automatic alignment with the West, including the United States (US) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), during the Cold War, sacrificing autonomy and sovereignty in order to cooperate with its partners (SULLIVAN, 2018).

It is important to note that Turkey has sought EU membership, without success, as negotiations have been stalled since 2018. Furthermore, the country faces recurring economic sanctions from the US whenever it takes a more independent stance. Retaliation from its allies occurred throughout the Republican period of Turkey, until the end of the Cold War, when the process of transforming the country's governing ideology began under President Turgut Özal (LAÇINER, 2009).

The lack of support from the West, dating back to the Cyprus issue in the 1970s, is one of the factors influencing Turkey's strategic pivot, which increasingly seeks autonomy from the West and regional leadership capabilities (USLU, 2003).

Within this perspective, Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs presents the country's transformation into an energy power as part of its strategy to become more autonomous and independent: "Türkiye aims to become an energy hub and an energy trading center" (MFA OF TÜRKIYE, 2025).

Energy security has become increasingly central to countries'

foreign policy strategies, as energy is essential for those seeking to remain sovereign on the international stage. The dynamic between energy dominance and dependence has progressively come to shape and condition technological, economic, political, social, and environmental relations both within states and across the international system. In this context, any country seeking leadership and strategic autonomy must secure control over its own energy resources, as energy capacity becomes a fundamental prerequisite for sovereignty, survival, and independent action in global affairs (SANTOS, 2020).

In this context, the current Turkish president has been asserting the right to exploit gas reserves discovered off Cyprus, while also exploring gas fields in the Black Sea, announcing in 2020 the largest gas reserve ever discovered in this sea. The country has also partnered with Russia, such as in the construction of the TurkStream pipeline. Additionally, Turkey participates in other pipeline projects, such as the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP), transporting gas from Azerbaijan to Europe, with Turkey serving as the main corridor, as well as pipelines like Blue Stream, connecting Russia and Turkey through the Black Sea, and others involving Iraq, Iran, and the Balkans.

Given these issues, this article seeks to examine the Turkish-Greek-Cypriot disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean through the lens of maritime power projection and international security theories, arguing that the Mavi Vatan doctrine constitutes not merely a naval strategy, but a structured revisionist project linking Neo-Ottomanism, energy security, and the contestation of the UNCLOS-based maritime order.

Unlike analyses that address the Mavi Vatan doctrine exclusively as a naval strategy, this article interprets its application as part of a broader project of ideological and energy-driven reconfiguration of Turkish foreign policy, articulating Neo-Ottomanism, energy security, and a contestation of the maritime legal order established by UNCLOS (1982).

In this sense, although recent studies have analyzed the Mavi Vatan doctrine primarily from the perspective of naval strategy and the modernization of the Turkish Navy, emphasizing its operational application in the Mediterranean, Aegean, and Black Seas, this article proposes a distinct approach.

Rather than understanding Mavi Vatan solely as a geostrategic-military instrument, this study interprets it as the expression of a broader political project, articulated with Neo-Ottomanism, the pursuit of energy

autonomy, and the contestation of the maritime legal order established by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. It argues that Turkish maritime revisionism is not limited to naval power projection, but rather constitutes a structured attempt to renegotiate the regional status quo, grounded in the tension between international legality and claims based on the principle of geographic equity.

Methodologically, a qualitative approach will be employed, based on a literature review on the topic, along with analyses of documents and international treaties. A brief historical reconstruction of relations among Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey will also be conducted, highlighting the importance of the Mediterranean, the Aegean, and the Black Sea to provide context for Turkey's governmental strategies.

The article will be divided into three sections. The first section will cover the conflict's stage, discussing the Cyprus issue and Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics. The second section will examine Turkey's maritime power projection, based on energy security concerns and geopolitical strategies in its foreign policy, incorporating the conceptual framework associated with Neo-Ottomanism. Finally, the third section will address the implications of Turkish strategies on its neighbors and Western partners, and how this affects its goal of becoming a regional power.

Disputes Between Turkey and Cyprus

This section aims to contextualize the conflict historically, politically, and legally, analyzing the Cyprus issue, the maritime legal framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982), and the geopolitical transformation driven by the discovery of hydrocarbons in the region. Understanding this triangle of factors is essential for analyzing the current disputes over natural gas exploration.

The Stage of the Conflict: The Cyprus Issue and Eastern Mediterranean Geopolitics

In 1960, the island of Cyprus became an independent state following an agreement with the United Kingdom, Greece, and Turkey. A bicomunal republic was thus established. However, tensions between the Greek-Cypriot community, representing the majority, and the Turkish-

Cypriot community led to intermittent conflicts.

In 1974, Turkey invaded the northern part of Cyprus under the justification of protecting the Turkish-Cypriot minority living on the island. The event occurred after the election in Greece of a government led by colonels under Makarios III, which promoted Enosis, the movement to unite Cyprus with Greece. Fearing for the future of the Turkish minority in Cyprus, Turkey launched Operation Atilla, based on the rights granted by the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee, taking the only action that challenged its alliance with the West throughout the Cold War (KER-LINDSAY, 2011).

The operation resulted in the Turkish occupation of the northern part of the island and the unilateral declaration of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in 1983, recognized only by Turkey to this day (DODD, 2010).

The occupation led to a civil war, with around 50,000 Turkish-Cypriots moving to the north and approximately 170,000 Greek-Cypriots displaced to the south of the island. To ease tensions, the United Nations (UN) established a “buffer zone,” known as the Green Line. Accordingly, the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) separates the two entities.

This period marked the peak of tension between Turkey and NATO until 2020, when Turkey purchased weaponry from Russia, as will be discussed later.

The Turkish occupation of the northern part of the island brought international attention to the Mediterranean as a geostrategic region. As the cradle of ancient civilizations, the sea reemerges as a central stage for geopolitical disputes, where history, international law, and energy interests intersect significantly.

The issue became even more prominent with the discovery of gas fields in the maritime area surrounding Cyprus. As previously mentioned, UNCLOS (1982) sought to establish rules and provide better regulation for maritime disputes. Among the concepts established by the convention is the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which extends up to 200 nautical miles from a state’s coast, granting the coastal state sovereign rights for the exploration and management of natural resources, both living and non-living.

The Maritime Legal Framework: UNCLOS (1982) and the Battle of Interpretations

Cyprus became a signatory of the convention to delimit its EEZ and establish bilateral treaties with neighboring countries. Treaties were signed with Egypt in 2003, Lebanon in 2007, and Israel in 2010.

Based on these delimitations, the Republic of Cyprus proceeded to auction hydrocarbon exploration blocks to international energy consortia such as ENI, Total, and ExxonMobil. According to the convention, the legitimate government of the entire island has sovereign rights to exploit resources within its EEZ, as defined by international law (GÜREL, 2013).

However, as previously noted, Turkey is not a signatory of UNCLOS (1982). The country has its own justifications for not joining the treaty. Firstly, Turkey represents the largest coastline in the entire Mediterranean, and establishing a median line, as prescribed by the convention, would be unfair, favoring Cyprus, which is geographically much smaller. Therefore, Turkey invokes the Principle of Equity, arguing that delimitation should be conducted through a bilateral agreement considering the proportionality of each country's coastline (HASAN, 2025).

More specifically, Turkey has argued, since its occupation of the northern part of the island, that the Greek-Cypriot government does not have the right to represent the entire island in resource matters, and that any exploration should benefit both communities on the island.

In 2011, as noted earlier, large gas reserves were discovered off the coast of Cyprus, beginning with the Aphrodite Field, containing 4.5 trillion cubic meters of gas (U.S. ENERGY INFORMATION ADMINISTRATION, 2025)². That same year, Turkey sought to sign a maritime delimitation agreement with the TRNC, aiming to legitimize the Turkish-Cypriot entity's claims and justify the deployment of its drilling vessels in contested areas (Eissler, 2014).

Turkey also emphasizes its historical interests in the region that predate UNCLOS (1982). On February 26, 2019, Mehmet Kemal Bozay, Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations, addressed the UN Secretary-General, asserting that Turkey possesses rights over the continental shelf corresponding to its common area with Cyprus, and that these rights are *ipso facto* and *ab initio*, naturally granted to Turkey by the geological extension of its territory, not merely because UNCLOS (1982) recognizes them (TURKEY

² See more: https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/Eastern_Mediterranean. Accessed: Oct. 22, 2025.

DIRECTORATE FOR EU AFFAIRS, 2022). In other words, the Ambassador's argument is based on geography, asserting that Turkey's continental shelf inherently grants it rights over these waters. Similarly, Turkey's coastline is significantly longer than that of Greece, Greek islands in the Aegean, or Cyprus.

Turkey's position vis-à-vis the convention creates an impasse since no international court can resolve the dispute. Even though the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) exists, if Turkey does not recognize it (INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL FOR THE LAW OF THE SEA, s.d.), there is no point in submitting the matter.

Turkey's interests are not limited to legal disputes alone. At stake are issues of regional power and influence, invoking its leadership role as the country with the longest Mediterranean coastline; sovereignty and recognition, seeking international acknowledgment of the TRNC; energy security and vital economic interests, as Turkey aims to become energy self-sufficient while emerging from an economic crisis by exploring new energy and gas sources in surrounding seas to avoid recurring economic pressures, particularly US-imposed sanctions; and, finally, national security, since maritime space and its control represent a strategic and national security concern.

The Geopolitics of Hydrocarbons: The Relevance of Cypriot Gas for Turkish Sovereignty

In the 2010s, vast natural gas reserves were discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly around Cyprus. This significantly intensified the dynamics of Turkey's disputes with Cyprus. The region was transformed into a new global energy province, with giant fields such as Leviathan (Israel), Zohr (Egypt), and, crucially for Cyprus, Aphrodite in Block 12 and Calypso in Block 6 (ABUSHANAB, 2024).

This issue brought urgency to the resolution of maritime controversies because, while it created the possibility for Cyprus to become an energy-exporting country, enhancing its importance vis-à-vis the EU, it also reinforced Turkish pressure on the country, which had been ongoing since the 1970s.

Following these discoveries, Turkey began sending drilling vessels to the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Its justification rested not only on the geological factors presented by Ambassador

Mehmet but also on its occupation of the northern part of the island, which it recognizes as Turkish territory. The Turkish drilling vessels bear the names of conquering sultans from the Ottoman era, such as Fatih (sent in 2019), in reference to Mehmed the Conqueror who captured Constantinople in 1453. In 2020, Turkey sent the vessel Yavuz and, more recently, the Abdulhamid Han in 2022. Beyond the symbolic significance of the vessels' names, which reference the great conquering empire, these ships are systematically escorted by frigates of the Turkish navy, in a clear demonstration of "Gunboat Diplomacy" (CABLE, 1994). The objective of this military action was twofold. While Turkey aims to physically prevent Cyprus from exploring the resources without Turkey's involvement, it also seeks to force a negotiation that includes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and Turkey itself in the sharing of exploration rights.

Strategically, Turkey signed a Memorandum with Libya, which delimited the maritime zone with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), creating a claimed maritime corridor that cuts through the Cypriot EEZ, directly challenging the energy map proposed by Greece, Cyprus, and Israel (TURKEY; LIBYA, 2019). Simultaneously, Greece and Cyprus formed an alliance with Israel to transport gas to Europe through the EastMed pipeline, which would exclude Turkey. The project was to be financed by the American company ExxonMobil, which withdrew shortly after realizing that Turkey was willing to escalate tensions in the Mediterranean by militarizing the exploration areas around Cyprus. Some of these areas overlapped with the proposed route of the EastMed pipeline.

Turkey's positioning on this occasion sent a clear signal that any large-scale project that exceeded what was considered fair by the Turks would turn the Mediterranean into a potential conflict zone (GRIGORIADIS, 2014). As we have seen, the agreement with Libya created a border between the two countries that would cut directly across the EastMed route, crossing through the EEZ claimed by Cyprus. Turkey positioned itself against the pipeline, arguing that the project was illegitimate and exclusionary, as it ignored Turkish and Turkish Cypriot interests in the region. In this sense, they conveyed the message that the creation of the pipeline would destabilize the region³. As a bargaining chip, it threatened Europe with potentially allowing the passage of illegal

3 2 See more: https://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_-1_-eastmed-projesine-ili%C5%9Fkin-anlasmanin-imzalanmasi-hk-sc.en.mfa?utm_source=chatgpt.com. Accessed: Oct. 22, 2025.

immigrants, thereby breaking the agreement⁴ it had made with Europe during the refugee crisis resulting from conflicts in the Middle East after the Arab Spring in 2011.

Turkey's power was clearly demonstrated on this occasion. The country also utilized the power of threats against other companies that might collaborate with the project, warning them of sanctions that would prevent them from participating in future projects with Turkey if they proceeded with the EastMed project. These threats came after the discovery of the largest gas reserve in the Black Sea in October 2020, as mentioned earlier.

The Sakarya field positioned Turkey as self-sufficient, giving it this advantage over its neighbors. With this discovery, made by the vessel *Fatih*, Turkey ceased to be viewed as an obstacle by Europe and began to be seen as a potential solution, as it could become a more viable and economical energy hub for Europe, in addition to being an alternative to Russian gas.

This section has illustrated the dispute over the power to exploit offshore resources among countries in close geographical proximity, who share maritime areas that can be contested from various perspectives. Although the 1982 UNCLOS is viewed by many as the "constitution of the sea", like any international agreement, it does not impose an obligation on countries to accept it as law.

By agreeing to the Memorandum of Understanding with Libya, Turkey made it clear to the international community that it can make agreements that suit its interests, even if they fall outside the provisions of the convention. Turkey's message is clear: to contest power and influence with the very West (US + NATO + EU) that has imposed restrictions on it for decades, since 1923.

We see here that the country is willing to seek ways to become autonomous in order to make decisions that favor issues and national strategies considered indispensable for its survival.

We also see that a country that represents the remnant of a great empire will not settle for being a mere puppet of international interests. On the geopolitical stage, all actors seek to increase their relative power (FIORI, 2015), and Turkey has indeed learned its strategic value and is

4 In 2016, Turkey made an agreement to regularize the status of refugees from conflict countries in the Middle East on its territory following the Arab Spring, aiming to help mitigate the impact of thousands of illegal immigrants on the European Union. Turkey was hosting 2.5 million refugees at that time. Meanwhile, the EU

willing to assume its role of international importance.

Next, we will examine how this shift in Turkey's performance within its geopolitical strategy came about, as well as its projects for its jurisdictional maritime waters, which involve the debate with Greece and Cyprus.

Turkey's Maritime Power Projection as Part of its National Defense Strategy

Since assuming power with the party he founded, Erdogan has positioned himself in a manner divergent from previous governments in the history of the Republic of Turkey over the last hundred years. This shift, initiated by President Turgut Özal during the end of the Cold War, took shape under Erdogan in the process known as Neo-Ottomanism.

The name given to this new ideology stems from the fact that Turkish society became divided between Kemalists—those who became followers of Kemal Atatürk—and those who today adhere to Neo-Ottomanism. Mustafa Kemal was the first president of Turkey and the leader responsible for victory in the wars of independence against the European powers, who had emerged victorious from World War I and had sought to partition the territory of the former Ottoman Empire since before the war through the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement.

As leader of the new republic, Kemal gave himself the name "Atatürk" (Father of the Turks) and, in order to break with the Ottoman past, seen as failed and backward, he adopted measures considered to be Westernizing for Turkish society. This was interpreted by many as a betrayal of the society's cultural and religious values. At the same time, others see him as a great representative of national leadership, since he was responsible for the country's independence (ZEYDANLIOĞLU, 2008; YIALLOURIDES & LANGIDES, 2012; LAÇINER, 2009; KAPLAN, 2013).

Kemalist ideas were defended, whether by domestic elites or through external interventions, throughout Turkey's republican history (Murinson, 2006). After the end of the Cold War, Özal sought to increase the number of Turkey's partners, moving away from the Western axis, comprised of the US and NATO, and drawing closer to countries of Turkic origin and Asian nations, within a framework of steering Turkey toward a more autonomous and independent posture (LAÇINER, 2009).

Subsequently, Erdogan founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and, influenced by the work *Strategic Depth* written by Ahmed Davutoğlu, elevated the ideology of Turkish nationality to serve domestic interests, independent of the interests of international partners.

In his work, Davutoğlu sought to highlight Turkey's role as an important and central actor on the geopolitical chessboard, not only regionally but also globally. *Strategic Depth* became a geopolitical and diplomatic doctrine that was absorbed into the country's Foreign Policy and, consequently, by Erdogan's government. This doctrine is based on the idea that Turkey is the heir to the Ottoman Empire and should therefore assume a central role in its regional surroundings, encompassing the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. The doctrine is founded on a civilizational and geopolitical vision, not a military one, but rather based on Soft Power.

Influenced by Davutoğlu and moving in the same direction, the doctrine of Neo-Ottomanism proposes the revaluation of the Ottoman heritage as the basis for the projection of power, cultural influence, and international legitimacy of modern Turkey. In other words, it is the attempt to restore the prestige, influence, and geographical reach that the Ottoman Empire possessed, without seeking to reconstruct it territorially, but by reclaiming its political, cultural, and religious centrality in the regions that were once under its dominion.

Thus, we can see here a difference between the ideology proposed by Davutoğlu in "*Strategic Depth*" where the approach was based on Soft Power. In the case of Neo-Ottomanism, the strategy is more directed towards power projection, seeking to reclaim Turkish centrality in regions that were once under Turco-Ottoman rule.

We can thus observe, therefore, a reference to the potential use of military strategy to achieve its objectives, if necessary.

It was in this context that the concept of "Blue Homeland" or "Mavi Vatan" in Turkish emerged. The idea of the "Blue Homeland" originated as an ideology initially coined by Turkish admirals and was later adopted as part of state policy by the government under the leadership of Erdogan and the AKP. This doctrine redefines Turkey's jurisdictional waters in an aggressive manner (ARETEUS, 2020).

Mavi Vatan, Blue Homeland

The concept visualizes Turkey's maritime space in the Aegean Sea, the Sea of Marmara, and the Eastern Mediterranean as a sovereign and contiguous extension of its continental territory. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the Mavi Vatan map claims vast areas that directly overlap with the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claimed by the Republic of Cyprus and portions of the Greek EEZ, including the island of Crete and the Dodecanese islets (GINGERAS, 2020).

This vision directly clashes with the median line principle of UNCLOS (1982), as Turkey maintains that islands should have limited or no maritime rights when located on its continental shelf. Thus, Mavi Vatan transforms a legal dispute into a national security imperative, providing the strategic justification for an offensive naval posture aimed at protecting what is considered "national maritime heritage"

Whereas under UNCLOS (1982) jurisdiction, both Cyprus and Greek islands (such as Rhodes, Kassos, Karpathos, and crucially, Crete) can claim 200 nautical miles for their EEZs, under the Mavi Vatan concept, Turkey asserts its rights over these waters based on its interpretation of equity and continental shelf rights. Consequently, Turkey claims rights over the continental shelf extending from its mainland. Thus, Turkey proposes a limitation on the rights of Greek and Cypriot islands: they may possess a small territorial sea circle (12 nautical miles), but should not have the right to generate an EEZ that cuts through the Turkish continental shelf⁵

The dispute arises because, according to Greek claims over the islands' EEZs, a kind of "Blue Wall" would be created, effectively imprisoning Turkey in terms of its ability to use its territorial waters. For a country with the longest coastline in the Mediterranean, which also controls two of the world's most important shipping straits, this criterion is perceived as profoundly unjust. Below, we can see a comparison of the two maps:

Map 1 – Greek and Cypriot EEZs

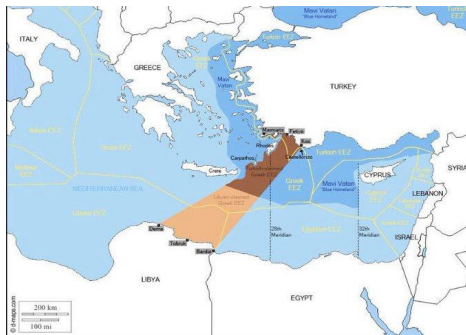
5 Diplomatic note sent to the United Nations (UN) - registered on the official website of the UN - Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea (DOALOS): "The Republic of Turkey wishes to reiterate that the Greek islands located on the western side of the median line between the mainlands of Turkey and Greece cannot have



Source: SADRI ALIBABALU (2022)⁶

In the map above, we can see the waters belonging to Greece and Cyprus, according to the EEZ rule comprising 200 nautical miles. Furthermore, the map highlights an agreement made with Egypt in 2020, in retaliation to the Memorandum of Understanding between Turkey and Libya, as an attempt to assert their contested rights regarding navigation in the Mediterranean. Below, we can see the map concerning the memorandum:

Map 2 – Memorandum of Understanding between Türkiye and Libya (2019)⁷



Source: Greek City Times (2025)

6 Egypt-Greece Maritime Delimitation Treaty. Available from: <https://acikerisim.sakarya.edu.tr/bitstream/handle/20.500.12619/98245/Sayyad%2520Sadri%2520Alibabalu.pdf?sequence=1>. Accessed: Oct. 21, 2025.

7 Memorandum of Understanding between Turkey and Libya. Available from: <https://greekcitytimes.com/2025/06/29/breaking-news-libya-turkey-maritime-deal-2025/>. Accessed: Oct. 21, 2025.

It is important to emphasize that the use of islands as tools for maritime power projection is a recognized strategy and has been employed by China, for example. The country has been constructing artificial islands in the South China Sea to claim rights over the EEZs generated from the territories of these islands. This strategy has created a significant international impasse (DAVENPORT, 2018).

Thus, as an already implemented part of the Turkish strategy within the Mavi Vatan ideology, we have the Turkish “Blue Corridor” as a response to the “Blue Wall” created by the right to 200 nautical miles for each Greek island in the Aegean Sea.

Map 2 shows the resulting display of a vast “corridor” of Turkish jurisdiction projecting southward and westward from its coast. This corridor cuts directly through what would be the EEZ of Cyprus and Crete according to UNCLOS (1982), as shown in Map 1.

These disputes have historical roots, as initially presented in this research. Greece and Cyprus view the possibility of a “Turkish revival” with great apprehension, having previously been part of the Ottoman Empire. Turkey, in turn, holds strong resentment over how its territory was delineated following the collapse of its powerful empire. For Turkey, the territorial treaties were humiliating and remain a scar, as highlighted by Haugom (2019) in his analysis of the “Sèvres Syndrome” According to the author, this treaty left scars on the Turkish psyche, influencing Turkish strategic culture through what resembles a “Sèvres Syndrome” in response to these perceived humiliating conditions.

Thus, we can perceive that the ideologies invoked by Davutoğlu with Strategic Depth, by Erdogan with Neo-Ottomanism, and the concept of Mavi Vatan, introduced within this context of Turkish strengthening through strategic decisions, are highly interconnected. They reflect the current phase Turkey is undergoing: a quest to regain its capacity for influence and the exercise of regional power, aiming to emancipate itself from the dictates of its Western partners.

Not coincidentally, Russia has been demonstrating similar behavior, within what Akçali and Perinçek (2009) term “Eurasian Renaissance.” When analyzing the Russian situation, it is important to observe that the same sense of encirclement imposed on Turkey by sea, as seen in this section, also applies to Russia through NATO expansion.

It is evident, therefore, that following the end of the Cold War, the world has been experiencing a shift toward multipolarity. Countries

that were once major powers in the past have found an opportunity to act more autonomously, given the absence of the obligatory alignment with one side or the other that characterized the bipolar world order.

The Practical Effects of Turkey's Maritime Strategy

Turkey's more assertive actions regarding Mavi Vatan have yielded positive outcomes for the country. International energy companies such as Italy's ENI, America's ExxonMobil, and France's TotalEnergies require regional stability to risk investing their resources in exploration fields off Cyprus. Should Turkey militarize the region where these exploration zones are located, the political and operational risk of these projects would increase drastically⁸. Therefore, investing in these fields without Turkey's approval represents a high risk for investors.

For example, in 2018, the Turkish Navy directly prevented an ENI drillship from reaching its exploration block, seeking to force Cyprus to recognize the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). It is important to note that in 2011, shortly after the gas fields off Cyprus were discovered, Turkey signed an agreement with the TRNC on the delimitation of the continental shelf, favoring Turkish claims in the Mediterranean. Crucially, the TRNC government, with Ankara's support, granted exploration licenses to Turkish companies, such as Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı (TPAO), within the EEZ it claims. Turkey presents this move as the legitimate defense of Turkish Cypriots' rights to the island's resources, contrasting it with what it describes as the unilateral appropriation of resources by the Greek Cypriot side (Akman, 2023). Furthermore, by creating a parallel legal framework with the TRNC, Turkey seeks to internationalize the conflict and present itself not as an aggressor, but as a guarantor of the rights of one of the parties in the conflict.

Another practical result of applying the Mavi Vatan Doctrine was the 2019 agreement with Libya. This not only challenged the EastMed pipeline route but also established a zone of Turkish influence that connected directly to Libyan waters, paving the way for future exploration. Subsequently, in 2022, Turkey and Libya's Government

8 There is an elevated risk that companies with offshore exploration licences from Cyprus will see cancellations of any existing contracts they have in Turkey, as well as being blacklisted from future tenders. These include Italy's Eni, the U.S.'s Exxon Mobil, France's TotalEnergies'. See more: <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/mi/research-analysis/turkey-cyprus-greece-marine-risks.html>. Accessed: Oct. 22, 2025.

of National Accord (GNA) signed a hydrocarbon exploration agreement. This agreement granted the Turkish state-owned company TPAO rights to prospect and explore for oil and gas in specific maritime areas off Libya, which overlap with the EEZs claimed by Greece and Cyprus. This agreement was the first major exploration contract Turkey managed to secure in disputed waters, legitimizing its presence and claims in a practical and economic manner (KANSU, 2020).

Regarding gas exploration off Cyprus, from which Turkey was being excluded, progress has been considerable. In October 2023, Turkey announced it had begun exploration in Block 7, in partnership with the TRNC, following bilateral agreements. Thus, the TRNC granted exploration licenses to the Turkish state-owned company TPAO. The previously mentioned drillships, Fatih and Yavuz, were dispatched to operate in Blocks 6 and 7, which the Republic of Cyprus had licensed to ENI and TotalEnergies.

This situation created a legal impasse, as the international community legally does not recognize any Turkish right to these explorations. On the other hand, through its naval power and partnership with the TRNC, Turkey has gained and currently exercises *de facto* control over parts of the Cypriot EEZ.

Turkey's reaction demonstrates that while international conventions hold some weight, they do not precisely dictate how the international geopolitical game functions, as there are no international laws or hierarchy capable of defining and controlling state behavior in the theater of power disputes. No law guarantees that the interpretation of UNCLOS (1982) must be sovereign. Turkey's challenges regarding these waters are legitimate, and the country, recognizing its strategic value and adopting the ideologies presented in this section, has been acting with increasing clarity on the international stage.

The Eastern Mediterranean Paradox: The Rigidity of UNCLOS (1982) and the Turkish Republic's Quest for Equity in the Post-Imperial Era

The dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and Cyprus has evolved into a complex game of multilateral security. Ankara's revisionist actions have served as a catalyst for regional power struggle dynamics, forcing a variety of regional and global actors to take positions and readapt their security strategies.

However, it is important to emphasize that the conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean, analyzed throughout this article, transcends a mere dispute over energy resources. It reveals a fundamental tension at the heart of international governance: the clash between the rigidity of a universalist legal system like UNCLOS (1982) and Turkey's demand for equity and historical recognition.

This aims to shed light on and clarify the reasons why Turkey has been reacting within the International System, seeking to reclaim its sovereignty and escape the significant international influence over its Foreign Policy.

The Issue of Kastellorizo Island as a Symptom of a Flaw in the Global Maritime Governance System

The analysis of Turkish maritime power projection and the mosaic of multilateral reactions can be perfectly illuminated by this central paradox: the case of the Greek island of Kastellorizo. This island, located just 2 km from the Turkish coast and with an area of only about 10 km², has the right to claim a 200-nautical-mile zone according to UNCLOS (1982).

In contrast, Turkey invokes the issue of geographical inequity, arguing that granting such a right to such a small island, relative to Turkey's territorial size, violates the principle of equity. This is a notable concept present in International Law, which seeks to achieve "just" outcomes by considering all circumstances, including geography. The inequity is emphasized by the fact that it is a Greek island located almost 600 km from the Greek mainland and only about 4 km from the Turkish coast.

The official Turkish position was summarized by former Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in 2021:

How can a small island located just 2 kilometers from our coast generate a 200-mile exclusive economic zone, completely blocking the access of a continental country with 8,000 kilometers of coastline? This is not only contrary to the principle of equity but constitutes an abuse of right that UNCLOS never intended to establish (ÇAVUŞOĞLU, 2021).⁹

The principal architect of Turkish foreign policy at the time, İsmet

9 Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxRXfmb-xTY>. Accessed: Oct. 22, 2025.

İnönü, argued that geographical proximity should determine sovereignty, a position rejected by the allied powers (Akman, 2023). This historical debate established the foundation for what would become, nearly a century later, Turkey's main argument against the automatic application of UNCLOS (1982).

Turkish revisionism harks back to the Treaties of Sèvres (1920) and Lausanne (1923), which delineated its borders following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, as previously presented in this article. Erdogan, in turn, views the possession of islands like Kastellorizo, so close to its coast, as a remnant of an order imposed by colonial powers who deliberately defined the borders of the nascent Turkish Republic over a hundred years ago. He believes this should be revisited and redivided fairly, in accordance with the very principles that international treaties uphold. For Turkey, islands situated on the continental shelf of another state cannot generate full maritime rights that deny the natural rights of the coastal state. Geographical proximity creates a relationship of geographical dependency that should be reflected in the legal regime (CEYHUN, 2023).

For Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, the intellectual architect of the Mavi Vatan doctrine, the island of Kastellorizo represents the spearhead of a maritime containment strategy against Turkey. Thus, the attempt to use this small island to generate 40,000 km² of maritime space is a geopolitical project, not a simple application of international law (GÜRDENİZ, 2019).

Therefore, the insistence on applying UNCLOS (1982) is interpreted by Turkey and its ideologies presented here as the perpetuation of a territorial order imposed by the victorious powers of the First World War, considered unequal since its inception. It is extremely important to emphasize that these are the same powers that today depend on Turkey for the maintenance of their security interests, such as the management of refugees, a counterweight to Russian and Iranian interests in the region, a source of gas supply, and a NATO partner with undeniable geostrategic relevance, hosting an extremely important military base for the US.

Meanwhile, Greece's response is strictly adherent to the rules of UNCLOS (1982), arguing that the rules are clear and that the island is inhabited by Greeks, guaranteeing Greece's legitimate right over the island. This argument is, in itself, contradictory when it comes to the non-recognition of Turkey's right over the northern part of Cyprus, based on the same argument: the Turkish population occupation in the north.

Neither Right Nor Wrong: The Legitimacy of Turkish Challenges According to the Doctrines of Neo-Ottomanism and Mavi Vatan

It is interesting to observe that the island of Kastellorizo, situated so close to Turkey, represents perhaps the most emblematic example of the tensions between the “Constitution of the Sea” – referring to UNCLOS (1982) – and the principles of equity protected by International Law itself. Thus, while the Greek position is legally solid and well-founded, the Turkish objection reveals a genuine gap in the system, given that the Convention does not offer adequate guidance for situations where the literal application of its rules leads to geometrically absurd results (KÖCHLER, 2020).

The controversy surrounding Kastellorizo thus reveals the core of the impasse: the legal certainty represented by the uniform application of UNCLOS (1982), contrasted with the pursuit of contextual justice based on specific geographical circumstances. This tension alone is capable of fueling the daily crises in the Eastern Mediterranean, challenging the ability of International Law to handle controversies and complex geopolitical realities.

As we have seen, Turkey has been seeking to regain its role as a regional leader, aiming to heal the wounds of a past marked by humiliating treaties and to position itself in relation to its European partners, who seem to want only what Turkey has to offer, while simultaneously viewing it as a potential enemy, always attempting to impede any Turkish actions aimed at independence, autonomy, and sovereignty.

The mere idea of restoring Turkey’s role as a regional leader does not inherently make it an aggressive power, but rather a country seeking to defend its national interests, like all other players on the global board. The challenges presented so far by the Turkish government are legitimate, and theoretically, nothing prevents Turkey from questioning and requesting a review of old treaties that continue to influence its country to this day.

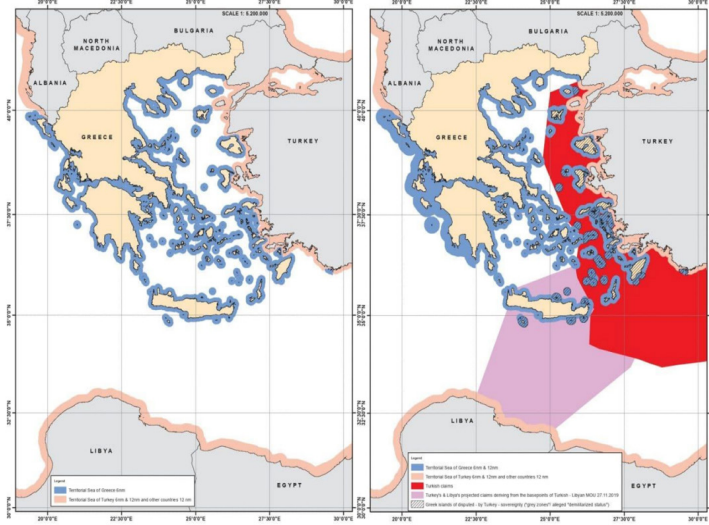
When it comes to a more militarized posture, such as the dispatch of ships to the Greek coast, as occurred in 2020¹⁰, this represents a demonstration of deterrent power and not necessarily a desire to initiate an armed conflict. However, considering the Mavi Vatan doctrine, where the issue of maritime sovereignty is treated as a matter of national security,

10 See more: <https://www.naval.com.br/blog/2020/07/23/marinha-turca-envia-30-navios-ao-mar-egreu-para-apoiar-navio-de-perfuracao/>. Accessed: Oct. 22, 2025.

the defense of interests becomes necessary – much like it is for its Western partners. Therefore, there is no reason to perceive Turkish doctrines as aggressive or hostile, contrary to how Western narratives about Turkey often portray them.

In the following map, we can observe the various territorial water claims:

Map 3 – Turkish territorial claims between 1972 e 2022



ΧΑΡΤΗΣ 16 – Συγκριτική αποτύπωση των τουρκικών διεκδικήσεων/βλέψεων 1972-2022
Μία σύγκριση του χάρτη Νο 2 (1972) με τον χάρτη Νο 15 (2022) περιγράφει ανάγλυφα το εύρος της κλιμάκωσης των τουρκικών διεκδικήσεων τα τελευταία 50 χρόνια.

Source: Greek Reporter (2022)¹¹

It is important to emphasize that, in 2019, Turkey sent a letter to the UN declaring the limits of its continental shelf up to the 28th meridian, effectively cutting the island of Rhodes in half. The letter also established that, to the west of this meridian, the limits of its continental shelf would be discussed only among “Relevant States” thereby dismissing the existence of territorial seas for the small Greek islands.

Turkey’s refusal to adhere to UNCLOS (1982) and its choice of a revisionist power strategy are not simple acts of illegality, but rather a calculated strategic choice – a right it claims to exercise. For Turkey, it

¹¹ Available from: <https://greekreporter.com/2022/06/09/turkey-challenge-greece-sovereignty-16-maps/>. Accessed: Oct 21, 2025.

is preferable to be a legal pariah than to be forced to accept a regime it considers intrinsically unjust. Its conduct in the Eastern Mediterranean is a symptom of a system that has failed to incorporate its perception of equity, leading it to seek a renegotiation of the status quo not in courtrooms, but at sea itself, through naval power projection, once dialogue was deemed not an option. Thus, its strategy of fait accompli and coercive diplomacy is the instrument of a revisionist country that sees no other way to resolve and reopen discussions on an issue it considers historically unresolved.

Similarly, UNCLOS (1982) does not provide a clear mechanism for resolving cases of exceptional and extreme geography like that of Kastellorizo. The Convention was designed for simpler and more predictable situations, not for enclaves that create disproportionate effects.

Turkey as an Energy Power

As we have seen, Turkey has undergone a domestic transformation that has influenced how the country behaves in the international arena. Thus, the nation has shifted from an introspective Kemalist republic to an assertive maritime and energy power. This transformation does not represent merely an economic or opportunistic phenomenon, but rather the materialization of a profound ideological evolution, where the Mavi Vatan doctrine emerged as the ultimate geopolitical expression of a power project that evolved from Kemalism to Neo-Ottomanism, transforming today into Erdoganism. Its energy strategy – which ranges from resource exploitation in the Black Sea, to disputes in the Mediterranean, and its participation in various pipeline projects – represents, in practice, these ideologies in a process of transformation.

During the government of Kemal Atatürk, who forged a nation-state focused on internal sovereignty and non-intervention, energy policy was essentially defensive and subsistence-oriented. The seas were barriers to be defended, not domains to be projected. With the crucial transition brought by Davutoğlu's Strategic Depth, Neo-Ottomanism became organized and proposed a new approach to how Turkey would behave regarding national strategic projects. In this view, Turkish strategies were not about territorial reconquest, but rather about civilizational and economic influence over the former Ottoman space. This shift in mindset allowed Turkey to see itself no longer as a periphery, but as a central and highly strategic country. Not coincidentally, the West wanted Turkey on its

side in NATO's first expansion in 1952.

Within this context of changing perceptions about its own strategic value, both internationally and for itself – akin to an awakening of its own capabilities – energy policy began to align with the project of national strengthening and autonomy. The strategy, therefore, was to position the country as a vital energy corridor between East and West, realized through its participation in strategic pipelines and, later, by the construction of TurkStream, its pipeline with Russia, demonstrating its decision-making autonomy in relation to NATO.

In this sense, Erdoğan's government absorbed the Neo-Ottomanist ideology and added to it a nationalist and militarized assertiveness. This new interpretation we call Erdoganism. With this new approach, Turkish Foreign Policy became more unilateral, reflecting a belief in Turkey's capacity to defend its interests independently, and it was at this point that the Mavi Vatan doctrine was adopted as state policy. Thus, we see that the Turkish maritime doctrine represents the definitive fusion of ideological currents with applied geopolitics in practice.

In this context, we will now present the three interconnected pillars upon which Mavi Vatan is applied. The first is the pursuit of self-sufficiency, where Turkey has striven to find new gas reserves and energy sources in nearby seas. The second pillar has been its imposition and coercion towards other countries in the Mediterranean Sea, using deterrent power to have its rights and interests in the "Blue Homeland" recognized, challenging the internationally accepted interpretation of UNCLOS (1982) as the only possible one. The third pillar was Pipeline Diplomacy, with the intention of participating in as many projects as possible, aiming to become an energy hub. Thus, Turkey could come to control the flow of energy passages and dictate terms, through the co-optation of adversaries via economic dependence and geographical influence. Energy has become the battlefield where Turkey fights not only for resources, but for recognition of its status as an indispensable power, heir to an imperial past and determined to shape the regional future.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to analyze how the Mavi Vatan Doctrine, articulated with Neo-Ottomanism and the energy security strategy, underpins Turkish revisionism vis-à-vis the maritime order established by UNCLOS (1982).

The analysis developed throughout this study demonstrates that the disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean transcend mere competition for energy resources. Primarily, these disputes represent the stage for a profound transformation in Turkey's identity and international posture. The transition from an introspective, Westernized Kemalist republic to an assertive power, based on Neo-Ottomanism and the Mavi Vatan doctrine, has completely reconfigured regional dynamics.

Turkey's strategy therefore operates on three interconnected fronts: the legal contestation of an international maritime order perceived as unjust and anachronistic by the Turkish government; the projection of naval and military power to deter adversaries; and economic-diplomatic concretization through energy and delimitation agreements that legitimize its claims. The specific case of the island of Kastellorizo synthesizes a stalemate in the disputes between Turkey and how it understands regional maritime geopolitics, versus how the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and its signatories interpret these issues. This exposes the gap in International Law's ability to reconcile universal legal security with demands for equity in unique geographical contexts.

The implications of this revisionist posture for Turkey's neighbors and Western partners are profound. Greece and Cyprus see their maritime claims challenged not only in courts, but on the ground, through gunboat diplomacy and bilateral agreements that bypass the UNCLOS legal framework. For the European Union and NATO, Turkish activism in the Eastern Mediterranean exposes internal alliance tensions and challenges cohesion in the face of a member state that pursues growing strategic autonomy, approaching powers such as Russia whenever its national interests so require.

Unlike analyses that address the Mavi Vatan doctrine exclusively as a naval strategy, this article has demonstrated that the doctrine integrates a broader project of ideological and energy-driven reconfiguration of Turkish foreign policy, articulating Neo-Ottomanism, energy security, and a contestation of the maritime legal order established by UNCLOS (1982).

In this sense, it has made evident that Ankara's ultimate objective is not limited solely to Cypriot gas or control of territorial waters. It is about a civilizational and strategic project to reaffirm national sovereignty, heal the wounds of a post-imperial past considered humiliating, and reposition Turkey as an autonomous, sovereign, and indispensable global actor.

The success of this revisionist endeavor, however, remains uncertain, dependent on a complex equation involving Turkey's economic resilience, the unity of regional opposition, and the ability of the current international order to assimilate, or contain, the rise of a revisionist power.

EQUIDADE VERSUS LEGALIDADE NO MEDITERRÂNEO ORIENTAL: A DOCTRINA MAVI VATAN E A CONTESTAÇÃO TURCA À CONVENÇÃO DAS NAÇÕES UNIDAS SOBRE O DIREITO DO MAR (CNUDM)

RESUMO

Desde a década de 2010, após as descobertas de hidrocarbonetos no Mediterrâneo Oriental, houve uma intensificação das disputas energéticas na região, reacendendo tensões entre a Turquia, com suas vizinhas, Grécia e Chipre, trazendo luz às divergências quanto à aplicação da Convenção das Nações Unidas sobre o Direito do Mar, de 1982. Assim, este artigo se propõe a analisar como a Doutrina Pátria Azul (Mavi Vatan), articulada junto à Doutrina do neo-Otomanismo e à Estratégia de Segurança Energética, exposta pelo Ministério das Relações Exteriores da Turquia como ferramenta de projeção de poder, fundamentam o revisionismo característico do governo de Erdogan. Inserido dentro do campo da Geopolítica e da Segurança Internacional, este artigo utiliza uma abordagem qualitativa, fundamentada em revisão bibliográfica especializada e análise documental e de tratados internacionais. Argumenta-se que o posicionamento turco constitui uma contestação estruturada da ordem jurídica estabelecida pela CNUDM (1982), para além de uma estratégia naval expansionista. Assim, a Turquia vem reivindicando o Princípio da Equidade frente à aplicação do Direito Internacional estabelecido pela convenção marítima. Conclui-se que a situação revela tensões profundas entre legalidade internacional, percepções históricas de injustiça territorial e reconfiguração do equilíbrio de poder regional, transcendendo disputas por recursos energéticos.

Palavras-chave: Turquia; Pátria Azul; Chipre; Grécia; Mediterrâneo.

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