

# Power Games in the Exclusive Economic Zone of the Republic of Cyprus: The Trouble with Turkey's Coercive Diplomacy

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## Abstract

*The general aim of this paper is to examine the case of the Republic of Cyprus' quest for exploring natural gas reserves in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) amidst Turkey's threats and mobilisation of naval military means, under the lens of coercion and deterrence theory. Particularly, the paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of Turkey's use of threats towards the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), in an effort to force the latter to cancel its programme of exploratory drills in the Eastern Mediterranean. A variable that must be examined in this case is the presence and engagement of international oil and gas companies which the RoC has licensed to explore the Cypriot EEZ, despite Turkey's dispute of Nicosia's authority. In this context, the paper's special objective is to outline the impact of these companies' presence on Turkey's strategy and the RoC's efforts to overcome Turkish revisionism and to accomplish its goals. The main hypothesis is that the engagement of the oil and gas companies suggests an intervening variable that modifies the power distribution in a game where the militarily stronger party (Turkey) attempts to coerce the weaker party (RoC),-which actually lacks sufficient military means,-and thus to impose its will on it as a result of mutual rational power calculations. In the framework of our analysis, we pay particular attention to the concept of 'coercive diplomacy', which has been developed by Alexander George. In order to evaluate Turkey's strategy in the case under examination, we refer to Ankara's ultimatum which led to the cancellation of the deployment of the S-300 system in Cyprus in December 1998 as an example of successful Turkish coercive diplomacy towards the RoC.*

**Keywords:** threat, blackmail, coercion, deterrence, coercive diplomacy, power, power indicators, patient gradualism, 'alarm signals'

## Threat and Power Asymmetry

The case under examination in this paper refers to a bilateral dispute which is characterized by two critical elements. The first is the will of one of the two involved parties to stop the other from proceeding with the fulfillment of a specific course of

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objectives by threatening to punish it in case it does not comply. In that case, Turkey argues that the RoC does not enjoy the sovereign right to search for, discover, unearth and exploit energy resources offshore, and that it will react if the RoC chooses to do so, as it argues that, unless this process involves the ‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’ (‘TRNC’) with an equal status, any progress will have a unilateral character. The second is the remarkable degree of power asymmetry between the two involved parties. Being a significant regional power, Turkey enjoys clear-cut military superiority over Cyprus, which is a small state with military means that cannot be compared with Turkey’s, either in terms of quantity or in terms of quality. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to shed light on the theoretical connection between threat and power asymmetry, as this will help us to come to conclusions on the future perspectives of this ongoing dispute, with special focus on Turkey’s options and actions as the party that attempts to change its opponent’s will to exercise its rights and, therefore, to revise the *status quo* offshore Cyprus.

The first question we should answer is ‘What kind of strategies can (or does) Turkey implement in this case?’ According to Mearsheimer, in his analysis of the ‘various strategies that states use to shift the balance of power in their favor or to prevent other states from shifting it against them’, war is ‘the main strategy states employ to acquire relative power.’ However, as he recognises the limits and the obstacles states usually face when choosing to fight a war, he adds that ‘blackmail is a more attractive alternative, because it relies on the threat of force, not the actual use of force, to produce results’; therefore, it is ‘relatively cost-free’.<sup>3</sup> He defines blackmail as the choice of a state to gain power at its opponent’s expense ‘without going to war by threatening to use military force against [it]... Coercive threats and intimidation, not the actual use of force, produce the desired outcome.’<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that Mearsheimer refers to great powers and relations between them, his definition of ‘coercive threats’ is quite helpful to our analysis. He clarifies that blackmail is the term he prefers to coercion, but he means the same thing: threats to use military force in order ‘to alter state behavior’.<sup>5</sup> In relation with the definition of coercion, Ellsberg underlines the following: ‘Suppose that I have some means of communicating with you and that I can change your expectations, to some extent, of my behavior. Given all these conditions, I can set out to coerce you: to influence you to choose the action I prefer you to take, by increasing your expectation that if you do not, I will choose some response leading to an outcome still worse for you than compliance.’<sup>6</sup>

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3 J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 138.

4 *Ibid.*, 152.

5 *Ibid.*, 459.

6 D. Ellsberg, ‘The Theory and Practice of Blackmail,’ *RAND Papers P-3883*, (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1968), 5.

Naturally, the second question is ‘What kind of strategies can the RoC implement in order to bypass Turkish reaction to the exercise of its sovereign rights?’ The most profound option is deterrence. Like coercion, deterrence is based on threat, on a promise that any harmful action taken by the aggressor will be met with equally (or more) harmful retaliation. It is ‘the threatened use of force to dissuade an adversary from undertaking something undesirable.’<sup>7</sup> In other words, it is an attempt to maintain the *status quo* through the threat of use of force.<sup>8</sup> There are several attempts to categorise deterrence, its potential use and its potential outcomes in the related literature. Like coercion, all these attempts include perspective use of military force as the punishment the revisionist state could suffer should it fail to abandon its aggressiveness.

The examination of these concepts reveals a degree of vagueness regarding their actual meaning and whether they refer to different or to the same thing(s). There are different ways to distinguish deterrence from coercion. Some authors pay attention to deterrence’s defensive nature,<sup>9</sup> contrary to coercion’s offensive motives. Others point out that what differentiates deterrence from other forms of threat is that it attempts to stop a future perspective from happening; therefore, it is only suitable for preventing future developments from taking place, not for managing ongoing ones.<sup>10</sup> In any case, both concepts refer to ‘the art of influencing the behavior of others by threats’,<sup>11</sup> therefore there is at least some common ground between them, while under given circumstances they could get mixed up, as international disputes and/or conflicts may play out in such a way that the roles of the involved parties may swap and their objectives may change or fluctuate.

The use of threat in international politics as a strategy aiming to modify the behaviour of an opponent is an important topic of discussion in strategic theory. What most scholars in this field suggest is that threat is (or should be) associated with a real capability of achieving a military strike, which would function as a prospective ‘ultimate punishment’ in case the opponent fails to comply with the threatening party’s demands. Especially in cases of power asymmetry between the involved parties, the starting point of this hypothesis is usually a pre-existing assumption that the militarily stronger party may be in a better position to achieve its objectives in a given dispute. Or, to quote Thucydides’ classic dictum in the Melian Dialogue: ‘the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must’.

However, International Relations’ theories observe a significant degree of

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7 R. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 5.

8 C. Koliopoulos, *Strategic Thought* [in Greek], (Athens: Pliotita, 2008), 21

9 G. Snyder, ‘Deterrence and Power,’ *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (June 1960), 167.

10 A. George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 1991), 5.

11 D. Ellsberg, ‘The Theory and Practice of Blackmail’, 2.

complexity that undermines the causal nexus connecting the possession of military capabilities with the potential outcomes of a strategy of threats. For example, according to Waltz, 'weak states of the world, having become politically aware and active, have turned world opinion into a serious restraint upon the use of force, whether in nuclear or conventional form.'<sup>12</sup> Waltz goes further than this, arguing that power asymmetry may not be enough for strong states to impose their will upon weaker ones, since 'when great powers are in a stalemate, lesser states acquire an increased freedom of movement. That this phenomenon is now noticeable tells us nothing new about the strength of the weak or the weakness of the strong. Weak states have often found opportunities for maneuver in the interstices of a balance of power.'<sup>13</sup> Others focus on potential variations between the degrees of commitment of the involved parties in an asymmetric relationship. As a consequence of the difference in their motives' volume, the potential outcomes of the dispute may not reflect the power equilibrium at the end of the day.<sup>14</sup>

Another way to approach the issue of power asymmetry and its impact on related policy outcomes is by examining the power indicators of each party involved in a given dispute and looking into their capacity to actually support their possessors' goals. As the experience of great powers has shown several times in the past, not all the means are suitable for achieving any kind of goals. This has been extensively discussed in relation with nuclear weapons, especially with the credibility of nuclear deterrence. According to Kouskouvelis, nuclear weapons may be sufficient enough to facilitate achievements on military and security issues, but this might not be the case on trade negotiations or which state will host the next Olympic Games.<sup>15</sup> In that sense, nuclear powers may not be efficient enough in supporting their demands *vis à vis* non-nuclear applicants. When it comes to cases of great powers that fail to achieve their military or diplomatic objectives against inferior opponents, the issue of the competence of power indicators has been extensively discussed after (or during) conflicts with surprising outcomes like the Vietnam War.<sup>16</sup> Taking these into account,

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12 K. Waltz, 'International Structure, National Force, and the Balance of World Power,' *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1967), 220.

13 *Ibid.*, 222.

14 See B. Womack, *Asymmetry and International Relationships*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016). R. Jervis, 'Deterrence and Perception,' *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 3, (Winter 1982-1983), 8.

15 I. Kouskouvelis, *Introduction to International Relations Theory* [in Greek](Athens: Piotita, 2005), 144-145.

16 Waltz, 'International Structure, National Force, and the Balance of World Power', 227-228; S. P. Huntington, 'Conventional Deterrence and Conventional Retaliation in Europe,' *International Security*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Winter 1983-1984), 35-40; W. W. Kaufmann, 'The Requirements of Deterrence,' (Center of International Studies, Princeton University, 1954), 12.

we may conclude that the stronger party may have better chances to capitalize on its power superiority towards the weaker one if the power indicators it can mobilize in a given dispute between them are suitable for the achievement of its goals.

In the following section, we will examine the case in the theoretical context described above and define the involved parties' strategies, their merits and their pitfalls, as well as their chances to achieve their goals.

### **The Case of the Cypriot EEZ: A Timeline of the RoC's Activity and Turkey's Response**

The efforts of the RoC to explore its EEZ in search of offshore natural gas reserves started in 2011. The RoC is a party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and, under the Exclusive Economic Zone Law 64 (I) of 2004 (as amended in 2014), implements the provisions of UNCLOS in relation with the declaration of its EEZ and its delimitation in case it overlaps with the EEZs of other countries.<sup>17</sup> In this context, the agreement signed in 2008 with Noble Energy, an American, Houston-based oil and gas company, as well as the agreement with Israel on the delimitation of the two countries' EEZs in 2010,<sup>18</sup> provided the legal framework for the necessary predrilling exploratory activities in Block 12 of the Cypriot EEZ (which lies adjacent to the Israeli EEZ).<sup>19</sup> In September 2011, Noble Energy started the first drilling operation in the Eastern Mediterranean under the authorisation of the RoC, which resulted in the discovery of a moderate natural gas reserve in a position called Aphrodite. Turkey (a non-party to UNCLOS) reacted vehemently to the plans of the RoC, which are considered by Ankara as 'unilateral actions', since it considers that 'there is no single authority which in law or in fact is competent to represent jointly the Turkish Cypriots and the Greek Cypriots, consequently Cyprus as a whole', as repeatedly stated in the related Turkish letters submitted to the United Nations.<sup>20</sup> Ankara recognizes only the so called 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' ('TRNC') in the northern part of the island, which was established in 1983 after the Turkish invasion of July and August 1974 and the *de facto* partition of the island, where it maintains a force of 40,000 troops. However, the 'TRNC enjoys no recognition by any other country except for Turkey itself, while the RoC *de facto* governed only by the

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17 Law 64(I) of 2004, The Exclusive Economic Zone Law, 2004, available at [http://www.olc.gov.cy/olc/olc.nsf/all/A0231939301952D1422576C1003014FF/\\$file/The%20Exclusive%20Economic%20Zone%20Law%202004%202010.pdf?openelement](http://www.olc.gov.cy/olc/olc.nsf/all/A0231939301952D1422576C1003014FF/$file/The%20Exclusive%20Economic%20Zone%20Law%202004%202010.pdf?openelement),

18 Agreement between the Government of the State of Israel and the Government of the Republic of Cyprus on the delimitation of the exclusive economic zone (with annexes). Nicosia, 17 December 2010, available at <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%202740/v2740.pdf>.

19 T. Tsakiris, 'Cyprus's Natural Gas Strategy: Geopolitical and Economic Preconditions,' *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2017), 32.

20 See <http://www.un.org/Depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/STATEFILES/CYP.htm>, .

Greek Cypriots since the intercommunal clashes of 1963-64 and essentially controlling only the southern part of the island since the summer of 1974, is internationally recognised.<sup>21</sup> Based on its own interpretation of the state of affairs in Cyprus, Ankara insisted that the RoC had no right to explore for oil and gas (or to authorise companies to do so on its behalf) in the region. On 2 September 2011, while tensions over Noble Energy's drilling preparations were escalating, Turkey's Minister for European Affairs, Egemen Bağış, was asked by Today's Zaman whether Turkey was considering to send its fleet to prevent the drilling from going ahead, and he replied as follows: 'This is what we have the navy for. We have trained our marines for this; we have equipped the navy for this. All options are on the table; anything can be done.'<sup>22</sup> Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (then Prime Minister) also made similar statements prior to the beginning of the drilling operation, while Ankara tried to dissuade Noble Energy from proceeding with its cooperation with the RoC.<sup>23</sup>

Despite prior statements, Turkey did not retaliate with any tangible measures against the launching of the drilling operation, while the Turkish navy discreetly monitored the works. As it is seen in the related statements, Turkish leaders refrained from making explicit threats against either the RoC or Noble Energy. Instead, they preferred to issue some vague warnings, without reference to specific penalties in case the interested parties did not comply. Instead of reacting with military means, Turkey and the 'TRNC' proceeded with fully aligned movements designed to dispute the RoC's sovereignty and underline the 'unilateral' character of its actions. A few days after the launching of Noble Energy's first drilling, they agreed to authorise Turkey's state-owned Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı (Turkish Petroleum Corporation, TPAO) to proceed with explorations off the coast of Cyprus, after signing a 'continental shelf delimitation agreement'.<sup>24</sup> Based on this 'agreement', they claim sovereign rights over a significant part of the RoC's EEZ, specifically (entire or parts of) blocks 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7 as part of the Turkish continental shelf, and blocks 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 12 as part of the 'TRNC's' continental shelf.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Turkish vessels started exploratory activities around Cyprus, in many cases within the Cypriot EEZ and accompanied by

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21 See UN Security Council Resolutions 186/1964, 541/1983 and 550/1984.

22 ERPIC, 'Turkey Threatens Cyprus over Offshore Drilling,' *Energy Brief*, (ERPIC.org, 2011, September 3), available at <https://erpic.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/2011-09-03-turkey-threatens-cyprus-over-offshore-drilling.pdf>.

23 M. Theodoulou, 'Turkey rattles sabres over Cypriot natural gas drilling,' *The National* (2011, September 9), available at <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/turkey-rattles-sabres-over-cypriot-natural-gas-drilling-1.376835>.

24 J. Peixe, 'Turkey Signs Oil Agreement with Turkish Republic of North Cyprus,' *Oil Price.com*, 25 September 2011, available at <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Turkey-Signs-Oil-Agreement-With-Turkish-Republic-Of-North-Cyprus.html>.

25 Tsakiris, 'Cyprus's Natural Gas Strategy', 41.

warships.

Despite the tensions caused as a result of Turkish reactions to the drilling activity in the Cypriot EEZ in the course of the years that followed, until February 2018, Turkish response to the subsequent exploratory drilling operations did not reveal any indications of serious military escalation. In this context, exploratory drilling operations, executed by Italian-owned ENI in Block 9 (partially adjacent to the Israeli EEZ) in September 2014 and January 2015, were not intercepted in any way by Turkish military forces, neither did any serious military activity take place. The same could be said for French Total's operation in Block 10, in February 2015. Some developments observed in the aftermath of these operations, i.e. the dispatch of Turkish seismographic vessel RV Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa accompanied by warships in the Cypriot EEZ (which interrupted the Cyprus Problem talks as the Greek Cypriot leader, President Nicos Anastasiades, pulled out in October 2014 in protest of these infringements<sup>26</sup>) could be interpreted as tit-for-tat replies.

In August 2015, ENI announced the discovery of a massive gas field in the Egyptian EEZ, named Zohr, the largest ever found in the Mediterranean, and only six kilometers away from Cyprus' Block 11.<sup>27</sup> The RoC and Egypt had signed a framework agreement on straddling hydrocarbon reserves in December 2013, which was triggered following the Zohr discovery.<sup>28</sup> This development revitalised the interest of oil and gas companies for the Cypriot blocks, which waned after the disappointing results of the exploratory drillings in blocks 9 and 10 (the latter was abandoned by Total after consultation with the Cypriot government). After the RoC initiated a new licensing round in February 2016, blocks 6, 8 and 10 were assigned to consortiums comprising of a total number of seven companies. After this development, ENI and Total deepened their involvement in the Cypriot EEZ, while the entry of the US giant Exxon Mobil increased US interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and, particularly, in Cyprus. At the same time, the tripartite partnerships of the RoC and Greece, with Israel and Egypt respectively, which gained impetus at a time when the new US administration, under Donald Trump, was working for to reinforce US relations with Tel Aviv and Cairo, were signifying an unprecedented geopolitical conjuncture

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26 E. Hazou, 'Drilling for Cyprus gas, a timeline,' *Cyprus Mail* (27 June 2016), available at <https://cyprus-mail.com/2016/06/27/special-report-drilling-cyprus-gas-timeline/>, .

27 ENI, 'Eni discovers a supergiant gas field in the Egyptian offshore, the largest ever found in the Mediterranean Sea,' *Eni.com* (30 August 2015), available at [https://www.eni.com/en\\_IT/media/2015/08/eni-discovers-a-supergiant-gas-field-in-the-egyptian-offshore-the-largest-ever-found-in-the-mediterranean-sea](https://www.eni.com/en_IT/media/2015/08/eni-discovers-a-supergiant-gas-field-in-the-egyptian-offshore-the-largest-ever-found-in-the-mediterranean-sea).

28 S. Evripidou, 'Cyprus and Egypt sign unitisation deal on the joint exploitation,' *Cyprus Mail* (13 December 2013), available at <https://cyprus-mail.com/2013/12/13/cyprus-and-egypt-sign-unitisation-deal-on-the-joint-exploitation/>.

that boosted the role of Cyprus in the region.<sup>29</sup> In February 2018, ENI announced a ‘promising gas discovery’ in Block 6 that ‘confirms the extension of the “Zohr like” play in the Cyprus Exclusive Economic Zone.’<sup>30</sup> What makes this development interesting to our research objectives is that a part of Block 6, which is adjacent to the Egyptian EEZ according to the delimitation agreement between Egypt and the RoC,<sup>31</sup> is considered by Turkey as lying within the Turkish continental shelf. For that reason, the spokesman of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tanju Bilgiç, made a statement in August 2016, after the block was licensed by the RoC, warning the interested companies that any activity without Turkey’s authorisation would not be possible.<sup>32</sup> However, the drilling operation was successfully accomplished without any interception.

After the ‘first shock’ in September 2011, Turkey’s strategy was profoundly modified through a tactical turn towards actions designed to question the RoC’s sovereign rights over its EEZ instead of a more conflict-prone strategy of military threats. This turn was established after Ankara announced, in March 2017, its intention to proceed with its own exploratory drilling operations in maritime areas it considered as part of its continental shelf in the Eastern Mediterranean, which in some cases coincide with the Cypriot declared and delimited EEZ.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, during that period, Turkey occasionally issued navigational warnings, reserving areas within the Cypriot EEZ, thus defying the RoC’s authorities. Last but not least, Turkey intensified its efforts to deter the companies involved in exploratory works under RoC’s authorisation from proceeding with their plans in the Cypriot EEZ.<sup>34</sup> However, the Turkish strategy seemed to shift again towards military coercion when, in February

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29 A. Mekel, ‘Birth of a Geopolitical Bloc: The Israel-Greece-Cyprus Axis,’ *Haaretz* (31 January 2016). available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-birth-of-a-geopolitical-bloc-the-israel-greece-cyprus-axis-1.5397833>; A. Samir, ‘Egypt, Greece, Cyprus: Model for successful international cooperation,’ *Egypt Today* (2017, November 21), available at <http://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/33551/Egypt-Greece-Cyprus-Model-for-successful-international-cooperation>.

30 ENI, ‘Eni announces a gas discovery Offshore Cyprus,’ *Eni.com*, (8 February 2018), available at [https://www.eni.com/en\\_IT/media/2018/02/eni-announces-a-gas-discovery-offshore-cyprus](https://www.eni.com/en_IT/media/2018/02/eni-announces-a-gas-discovery-offshore-cyprus).

31 Agreement between the Republic of Cyprus and the Arab Republic of Egypt on the Delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone, (2003, February 17), available at <http://www.un.org/Depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/TREATIES/EGY-CYP2003EZ.pdf>.

32 E. Andreou, ‘Turkey warns foreign firms over interest in Block 6,’ *Cyprus Mail* (2016 August 2), available at <http://cyprus-mail.com/2016/08/02/turkey-warns-foreign-firms-interest-block-6/>,

33 O. Kutlu, ‘Turkey to seismic explore in Med., Black Sea,’ Anadolu Agency (2017, March 9), available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkey-to-seismic-explore-in-med-black-sea-minister/767151>.

34 Tsakiris, Cyprus’s Natural Gas Strategy, 46; N. Prakas, ‘Turkey warns companies not to explore in Cyprus’ block 6,’ *Sigmalive* (2016, August 2), available at <http://www.sigmalive.com/en/news/energy/147518/turkey-warns-companies-not-to-explore-in-cyprus-block-6>.



2018, Turkish military ships obstructed ENI's drill ship Saipem 12000 from executing an exploratory drill in Block 3 of the Cypriot EEZ.<sup>35</sup> This development followed ENI's announcement of discovery in Block 6, and it was the first (and only one until now) serious incident of military activity of this kind since the beginning of the Cypriot exploratory programme. From a geographical point of view, and compared to blocks 12, 9, 11 and 6, Block 3 is closer to Turkey, adjacent to the Lebanese EEZ and considered by Turkey and the 'TRNC' as lying within the 'Turkish Cypriot' continental shelf. It's worth noting that the Lebanese parliament has not ratified the delimitation agreement between Lebanon and the RoC (signed in 2007).

More recently, in view of Exxon Mobil's exploratory drilling in Block 10, which ultimately started in November 2018 without any problems, Turkey announced that its first drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean was only a matter of time, while Turkish leaders continued to issue warnings against the RoC. Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, stated in September 2018: 'Turkey has warned the Greek Cypriots [as he called the RoC] from the onset not to take such irresponsible steps. If they still believe they have nothing to lose they are mistaken.'<sup>36</sup> The Turkish drilling operation started a few days before Exxon Mobil's works, in October 2018.<sup>37</sup>

### **Patient Gradualism and Alarm Signals**

Having in mind the theoretical discourse on the use of threat and aiming to put Turkey's attempts to reverse the RoC's drilling programme into context, we conclude that Turkey's activity cannot be categorised as plain military coercion, neither does the RoC seem to exercise deliberate deterrence. First of all, Turkey's strategy does not include a clear-cut threat to use military force in retaliation for a specific action, while the RoC does not respond to Turkish warnings and tit-for-tat activity, neither does it have the means to meet potential actual use of military force by Turkey. Instead, Ankara only implies that military force could be an option, among other ones and under unspecified circumstances. Turkey's only serious military infringement of Cyprus's offshore drilling works, namely the disruption of ENI's scheduled operation in Block 3, could be seen as a choice for limited use of military force, aiming to convey a message to the implicated parties. However, the fact that it happened in this specific

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35 M. Kambas, 'Standoff in high seas as Cyprus says Turkey blocks gas drill ship,' Reuters (2018, February 11), available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyprus-natgas-turkey-ship/standoff-in-high-seas-as-cyprus-says-turkey-blocks-gas-drill-ship-idUSKBN1FV0X5>.

36 G. Psyllides, 'Cavusoglu: Greek Cypriots act as if Cyprus belongs to them,' *Cyprus Mail* (2018, September 1), available at <http://cyprus-mail.com/2018/09/01/cavusoglu-greek-cypriots-act-as-if-cyprus-belongs-to-them..>

37 M. Xuequan, 'Turkey starts first deep drilling in Mediterranean Sea,' *Xinhua News* (2018, October 30), available at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/31/c\\_137570181.htm..](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/31/c_137570181.htm..)

block, with the geographic characteristics described above, where Italian ENI had the operational responsibility, while the operations of French Total and US Noble Energy and Exxon Mobil started without any interruptions (even in Block 6 where Turkey claims sovereign rights), should be highlighted as indicative of Turkey's tactical options and limitations. Apparently, Turkey has chosen to take non-military measures to dispute the legitimacy of the RoC's offshore activity, instead of military ones that would forcibly impose Ankara's will. Last but not least, Ankara attempts to persuade the foreign companies that their drilling operations, under RoC's authorisation, will be more costly than beneficial.

Taking these into account, we argue that Turkey's strategy, especially after September 2011, and its failure to deter the RoC from launching its exploratory programme can be considered as a sort of coercive diplomacy. Alexander George defines coercive diplomacy as

'efforts to persuade an opponent to stop and/or undo an action he is already embarked upon.[...] Coercive diplomacy does indeed offer an alternative to reliance on military action. It seeks to *persuade* an opponent to cease his aggression rather than bludgeon him into stopping. In contrast to the blunt use of force to repel an adversary, coercive diplomacy emphasizes the use of threats to punish the adversary if he does not comply with what is demanded of him. If force is used in coercive diplomacy, it consists of an exemplary use of quite limited force to persuade the opponent to back down. By 'exemplary', I mean the use of just enough force of an appropriate kind to demonstrate resolution to protect one's interests and to establish the credibility of one's determination to use more force if necessary. The strategy of coercive diplomacy, however, does not require use of exemplary actions. The crisis may be satisfactorily resolved without an exemplary use of force; or the strategy of coercive diplomacy may be abandoned in favour of full-scale military operations without a preliminary use of exemplary force. In employing coercive diplomacy, which may already include non-military sanctions, one gives the adversary an opportunity to stop or back off before one resorts to military operations.<sup>38</sup> After all, mere use of military threats, as Jervis observes, may 'prove particularly troublesome, since if they fail, they can drive the threatening party onto a path it may not actually want to follow'.<sup>39</sup>

When it comes to the variants of coercive diplomacy, George explains that a 'policy maker should decide (1) what to demand of the opponent; (2) whether and how to create a sense of urgency for compliance with the demand; (3) whether and what kind of punishment to threaten for noncompliance; and (4) whether to rely solely

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38 George, *Forceful Persuasion*, 5-6.

39 R. Jervis, 'Getting to Yes With Iran: The Challenges of Coercive Diplomacy,' *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (January/February 2013), 107.

on the threat of punishment or also to offer conditional inducements of a positive character to secure acceptance of the demand.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, taking into account these components, especially the first three, a strategy of coercive diplomacy could take the form of the following variants: (1) a full-fledged ultimatum that would involve a demand on the opponent, a time limit or a sense of urgency for compliance with the demand, and a threat of punishment in case the opponent fails to comply; (2) a tacit ultimatum, which does not involve a specific threat of punishment but a message which is composed of a combination of military preparation and stern warning; (3) a ‘try-and-see’ approach, which includes a demand with no time limit or strong urgency, but only a limited coercive threat or action, followed by a re-assessment of the situation according to the opponent’s reaction to the threat, which will define whether there will be a next step; and (4) a ‘gradual turning of the screw’, where the ‘threat to step up pressure gradually is conveyed at the outset and is carried out incrementally’. Again, there is no time urgency, but instead a threat of ‘a gradual, incremental increase in coercive pressure’ rather than a threat to escalate militarily if there is no compliance.<sup>41</sup>

When it comes to our case study, Turkey apparently avoids a full-fledged ultimatum. That was the situation, for example, in 1996-1998, when Turkey clearly threatened to use military force if the RoC received the S-300 surface-to-air missiles, which it had ordered from Russia. It is worth noting that, Turkey’s coercive diplomacy was successful then, as the Cypriot government, in coordination with Greece and due to considerable international pressure, decided to comply and send the S-300 system to Crete, instead of its initially scheduled deployment in Cyprus.<sup>42</sup> In the case we examine in this paper, the model of tacit ultimatum is more applicable as there is no specific threat of punishment. At the same time, we cannot say that there are military preparations either, but only selective mobilization of limited naval forces. It seems that this looks more like a combination of a ‘try-and-see’ approach and ‘gradual turning of the screw’. Turkey takes a patient and gradual approach, which mainly involves non-military means, while it sometimes tries to ‘keep the opponent awake’ by increasing the military volume of its activity. By selectively mobilising its navy, like it did in Block 3, it aims to send alarm signals periodically in order to remind Nicosia and the foreign oil and gas companies of its resoluteness to stop the RoC from exploring its EEZ and, especially, from exploiting the discovered natural gas reserves. At the same time, there are no strong indications that military escalation is among Turkey’s

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40 George, *Forceful Persuasion*, 8.

41 Ibid.

42 M. Kontos and A. Karyos, ‘The Threat of Use of Military Force Under Unequal Power Relations: The Crisis of the S300 Missile System in Cyprus, 1996-1998’ [in Greek], *Political History of the Republic of Cyprus after 1974*, (2018) organized by the University of Nicosia, School of Law, 12-13 October 2018.

options, at least not among its primary ones and not at this stage.

### **A Structured Evaluation of Turkey's Strategy and Its Perspective Efficiency**

As the case under examination is ongoing, we cannot safely evaluate the actual efficiency of Turkey's strategy. However, we can proceed with some assumptions about its potential efficiency by testing its applicability with the seven conditions that, according to George, 'favor (although they do not guarantee) effective coercive diplomacy':<sup>43</sup> clarity of objective, strength of motivation, asymmetry of motivation, sense of urgency, adequate domestic and international support, opponent's fear of unacceptable escalation, and clarity concerning the precise terms of settlement of the crisis. In order to have a measure for comparison, we will use Turkey's ultimatum which led to the cancellation of the deployment of the S-300 system in Cyprus as an example of successful Turkish coercive diplomacy towards the RoC.

*Clarity of objective.* In the last few years, under the Justice and Development Party's rule, Ankara has promoted an ambitious foreign policy agenda which aims to increase Turkey's regional influence or, at best, to render Turkey a regional hegemon in the broader Middle East.<sup>44</sup> The main power indicator that Ankara tries to exploit to this end has been its soft power, namely its capacity to influence Arab groups and populations which espouse similar religious doctrines. By adopting the profile of a religious leader with trans-border appeal, President Erdoğan chose to clash with Western 'civilization' in order to promote an alternative Islamic paradigm. In this framework, a new set of interactions emerged, which critically affected Turkey's relations with several actors like the United States, the EU and Israel, as well as with other Muslim states like Iran, Syria and Egypt.

In the context of its regional aspirations, Turkey's special objective in the situation under examination is to stop the RoC from fulfilling its offshore energy aspirations. In relation with energy matters, Ankara's broader (strategic) objective is to become a regional energy leader and/or a regional energy hub.<sup>45</sup> The RoC's programme would jeopardise Turkey's regional aspirations, especially if the RoC managed to become a regional energy player in defiance of Turkey's own interpretation of the state of affairs on the island and generally in the Eastern Mediterranean. At first sight, the actual (special) objective of Turkey's coercive diplomacy seems to be simple and clear. However, the process of exploiting natural gas reserves is a long-lasting one, comprised

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43 George, *Forceful Persuasion*, 76-81.

44 M. Kontos, 'Hegemony and Balance of Power in the Middle East,' *Eastern Mediterranean Geopolitical Review*, Vol. 2 (2016), 25.

45 J. Richert, 'Is Turkey's Energy Leadership Over Before it Began?' (Sabancı University Istanbul Policy Center; Stiftung Mercator Initiative, 2015). G. Windrow, 'Realization of Turkey's Energy Aspirations Pipe Dreams or Real Projects?' Brookings, *Turkey Project Policy Paper*, Number 4 (2014).

of many stages. The RoC has already achieved some progress, especially as regards the Aphrodite reserve in Block 12, in which the exploratory stage has been completed and the RoC has already signed an agreement with Egypt for the construction of a pipeline that will transport natural gas to an Egyptian liquefaction plant and from there to the markets.<sup>46</sup> As the project does not have a ‘once-off’ character, Turkey’s objective needs to be adjustable and divisible. The problem is that this flexibility undermines the clarity of the objective and, consequently, the clarity of the messages conveyed to the opponents. In other words, how far Turkey is willing to go in retaliation to which specific actions of the RoC, under which circumstances and at which stage of the process is rather unclear. Contrary to the S-300 case, where the objective was much clearer: the anti-missile system should not be deployed in Cyprus. In that case, the clarity and the ‘once-off’ character of the stake was a catalyst for the successful application of the threat.

*Strength of motivation.* Considering Ankara’s aforementioned special and strategic objectives in the preventing Cyprus from exploring for and exploiting natural gas, we can say that Turkey has a strong motive to stop the RoC from proceeding with its drilling programme. However, the risk of Cyprus discovering and monetising natural gas reserves is far from being existential for Turkey, while the fact that the exploitation process is long-lasting and the objectives are adjustable may weaken the original motive and/or create secondary ones. Furthermore, Turkey and the ‘TRNC’ are trying to connect Cyprus’ offshore energy quest with negotiations on the Cyprus Problem. If they manage to put the hydrocarbons issue on the table, they could achieve significant bargaining payoffs, even if the RoC manages to complete the exploratory programme and starts making money from the natural gas. On the other hand, the stakes are higher for the RoC, as even moderate natural gas findings may have considerable impact on the tiny Cypriot economy, while a potential cancellation of the programme would be extremely detrimental for the country’s international credibility, as contracts with prestigious companies and agreements with friendly countries would have to be defaulted. Therefore, Nicosia may estimate that it is worth taking the risk and move forward, especially inasmuch as Turkey’s military threat fades or loses its credibility. Furthermore, it also seems that the interested companies’ motivation remains strong even after the interception of Saipem 12000 in February 2018. This may be explained by the encouraging indications about the potential for significant natural gas findings in the Cypriot EEZ.

*Asymmetry of motivation.* As George observes, ‘coercive diplomacy is more likely to be successful if the side employing it is more highly motivated by what is at stake in the

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46 G. Psyllides, ‘Cyprus, Egypt sign gas pipeline agreement,’ *Cyprus Mail* (2018, September 19), available at <https://cyprus-mail.com/2018/09/19/cyprus-egypt-sign-gas-pipeline-agreement/>.

crisis than its opponent'.<sup>47</sup> As we argue above, the RoC seems to have stronger motives to risk suffering Turkey's wrath than Turkey has to lead the crisis to an uncontrollable escalation that would probably dash the RoC's aspirations, but it would also bear significant diplomatic cost. Furthermore, the fact that the actual dispute is playing out in the open sea almost diminishes the sense of danger for the Cypriots, while a potential shift of the crisis to Cypriot soil would probably fail to convey the right message to the oil and gas companies. On the contrary, in the S-300 crisis, although both sides had equally strong motives to achieve their objectives, the RoC could survive without the S-300 system despite the political and psychological consequences of the cancellation, while a potential Turkish military strike against Cyprus could jeopardise the Cypriot economy as tourism would be dramatically affected.

*Sense of urgency.* It is difficult for Turkey to create a sense of urgency that would put additional pressure on the RoC, as this does not have 'once-off' characteristics. In other words, the Turkish demand does not call for one specific action by the RoC, but for the termination of an ongoing course of actions. Therefore, since Noble energy started the first drilling operation in September 2011 and, subsequently, other companies accomplished several more drillings without succumbing to Ankara's warnings and discovered two natural gas reserves, an effort to create a sense of urgency would be meaningless. On the contrary, with the S-300 missiles, as the scheduled delivery of the Russian system to Cyprus approached, Turkey eventually managed to create a sense of urgency with international impact, which became evident by the concerted pressure exercised by the international community on Nicosia, requesting the cancellation of the missiles' deployment.<sup>48</sup> Specifically, by threatening to attack the S-300 system, Turkey put pressure on the RoC, and Nicosia had to use the remaining time before the system would be delivered to consider alternative scenarios. The fact that Nicosia issued specific proposals aiming to bargain, such as cancelling the deployment of S-300s in return for Turkey's commitment to demilitarise Cyprus,<sup>49</sup> as well as twice postponing the delivery of the Russian missiles,<sup>50</sup> indicated that it felt the pressure caused by the urgency of the matter.

*Adequate domestic and international support.* Since the issue in question does not affect the lives of Turkish citizens in any tangible way, essential (or lack of sufficient) domestic support is not a crucial factor that could define the efficiency of Turkey's coercive diplomacy. On the contrary, international support is very important for

47 George, *Forceful Persuasion*, 77.

48 C. Taylor, 'West frets over 'crisis' countdown in Cyprus,' *Cyprus Mail* (1998, January 21).

49 Phileleftheros, 'Direct agreement with the USA on flights,' [Απ' ευθείας με τις ΗΠΑ συμφωνία για Πτήσεις] *Phileleftheros* (1998, February 9).

50 Phileleftheros, 'The S-300 will be ready for deployment in October,' [Επιχειρησιακά έτοιμοι τον Οκτώβριο οι S-300] *Phileleftheros* (1998, June 10).

both sides and, for that reason, Turkey tried to achieve international legitimacy for its demands, although without success. At the same time the RoC managed to get backing for its offshore exploratory programme by cooperating with (or by getting supporting statements from) significant international and regional players, like the European Commission and the European Council, the United States, Israel, Egypt and, of course, Greece. International support vested Nicosia's actions with international legitimacy that raised the expected cost of Turkey's potential counter-measures. This did not happen in the S-300 case, as we mentioned above: the RoC was urged by many friendly countries, like the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and, at the end of the day, Greece, to cancel the delivery of the Russian missiles. Lack of international legitimacy, despite the fact that Cyprus maintained the right to reinforce its defence capacity, was one of the catalysts for Nicosia's final decision.

*Opponent's fear of unacceptable escalation.* Coercive diplomacy does not necessarily entail a real intention to use military force, but it has better chances of success if the use of force is on the table. If, according to the opponent's perception, the potential cost of its actions is acceptable, then minimal-cost coercive diplomacy will not have any realistic chances to succeed. In cases of power asymmetry, the weaker party is by definition more vulnerable to the mightier's threats and warnings, therefore its perceptions of the potential cost will be adjusted accordingly. The worst-case scenario for the weaker party would be an uncontrollable escalation of a potential use of force by its opponent, as the latter would probably try to exploit its military supremacy and the former would be forced to retreat. This was Nicosia's main disadvantage in the S-300 case: in the event of military engagement, the possibility of escalation that would bring about unacceptable cost to the RoC could not be ruled out, therefore the decision to cancel the missiles' delivery was a rational choice. In the case under examination, though, since Ankara (for the time being) fails to convey a clear-cut message of potential use of force if its conditions are not respected, military escalation is a rather unlikely scenario. The structure of the case, the roles allocated among the interested parties and the dominating perceptions are such that none of the interested parties would like this to happen.

*Clarity concerning the precise terms of settlement of the crisis.* As George observes, 'clarity of objectives and demands may not suffice; in addition, it may be necessary in some cases (as, for example, in the Cuban crisis) for the coercing power to formulate rather specific terms regarding the termination of the crisis the two sides have agreed upon and to establish procedures for carrying out these terms and verifying their implementation... The adversary who has succumbed to coercive diplomacy may need specific and reliable assurances that the coercive power will carry out its part of

the termination agreement'.<sup>51</sup> In the EEZ dispute, there are practical obstacles that make an agreement on the terms of settlement extremely difficult. The most serious is Turkey's refusal to recognise the RoC and its insistence on the 'new realities' brought about by the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and the self-proclamation of the 'TRNC' in 1983. Turkey considers the RoC as 'defunct'<sup>52</sup> and it systematically avoids the implicit or explicit establishment of any official link with Nicosia. Therefore, an attempt to cooperate with the RoC with a view to achieve a mutually accepted settlement would be inconsistent with the policy of no recognition. Turkey leaves this role to the 'TRNC', as the 'equal partner' of the 'Greek Cypriot Administration' in a future reunified Cyprus. However, the fact that the RoC runs its drilling programme outside the framework of the Cyprus Problem negotiations, as a sovereign right of a state that functions properly despite the *de facto* division of its territory, denies the (internationally unrecognised) 'TRNC' any role in this matter at this stage. For the S-300 issue, the context was fundamentally different, as the course of the events demonstrates that Turkey believed that the RoC would succumb without achieving any gains. This is probably why the Greek Cypriot proposal for an agreement to demilitarise Cyprus in return for the cancellation of the deployment of the missiles to the island was rejected by the other side. Significantly, Turkey rejected any commonly agreed terms of settlement other than its own original demand. Or, to put it in another way, Ankara decided to impose the terms of the settlement in a hegemonic manner.

## Conclusion

After analysing our case under the lens of coercion and deterrence theory, we conclude that Turkey's strategy, which aims to interrupt the Cypriot quest for natural gas offshore and to reinforce Ankara's regional aspirations, is not compatible with the model of coercion, which mainly involves military force. At the same time, the RoC does not take any tangible measures (in response to Turkey's efforts to stop the former's drilling programme) which could have been interpreted as a form of deterrence. Instead, Turkey prefers a strategy of coercive diplomacy, aiming not to forcibly impose its will, but to give 'the adversary an opportunity to stop or back off before [Turkey] resorts to military operations'. More specifically, Turkey takes a gradual approach, which involves only exemplary military mobilisation, in an effort to maintain a sense of threat in the opponent's mind that will modify his future choices accordingly.

What makes our case particularly interesting is the fact that Turkey's clear-cut

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51 George, 'Forceful Persuasion', 80-81.

52 T. Tziosis, "The "defunct Republic of Cyprus" (according to Turkey) in the present phase of the Cyprus Problem," (Nicosia: The Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs, Eastern Mediterranean Policy Note No. 13, 2017, January 10), available at [http://www.emgr.unic.ac.cy/wp-content/uploads/EMPN\\_13.pdf](http://www.emgr.unic.ac.cy/wp-content/uploads/EMPN_13.pdf).



military advantage over the RoC has not played a critical role in this dispute, at least not for the time being. The main reason for this seems to be the presence of multinational oil and gas companies, some of them from countries with high diplomatic and military status and international impact. The fact that Turkey chose to intercept a pre-scheduled activity in Block 3, which is geographically positioned close to Turkey and is licensed to Italian ENI, while it refrained from any forcible measures in cases where French or US-based companies were involved (including Block 6 where Turkey claims sovereign rights), suggest an indication of the validity of this hypothesis. We may argue that Ankara's options are affected by a sense of self-deterrence, which takes the form of 'an unwillingness to take necessary initiatives as a result of a self-induced fear of the consequences.'<sup>53</sup> These potential consequences, of course, would not be military but diplomatic.

Our structured evaluation of Turkey's strategy indicates that, for the time being and at this stage of the dispute, it is unlikely that Ankara's objectives will be fulfilled, taking into account the limitations described above, which are related to the efficiency of Turkey's power indicators and the structure of the case under examination. However, the process to finally exploit natural gas findings is long-lasting, and therefore, the stakes do not have 'once-off' characteristics. In that sense, it is possible that the motives and the available options of the parties involved may be restructured in the future in such a way that the current balance may be modified. The possibility of a win-win-situation later on cannot be ruled out, and neither can a critical escalation of tensions, maybe in the form of Turkish drillings in the Cypriot EEZ, or even through an increase of military tensions. Potential future natural gas findings (or failure to meet the original expectations), actions related with the exploitation of the reserves, as well as developments regarding the talks for a solution to the Cyprus Problem, are some potential modifying factors. In any case, our conclusions will remain valid in a broader context, in relation to the options of small states to achieve goals that are opposed by more powerful states, and when specific balance configurations are in place.

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