

Greek-Italian Maritime Deal Disrupts Turkey's Endeavour for East Mediterranean Dominance

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Greece and Italy signed a historic agreement yesterday that demarcates the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of the two countries in the Ionian Sea. The agreement signed between Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias and his Italian counterpart Luigi Di Maio has many ramifications in the entire Eastern Mediterranean region, but especially against Turkey's ambitions of East Mediterranean hegemony.

The agreement helps establish Italy as an energy player, especially as it has already taken an active position in the construction of the Eastmed pipeline – a major project between Greece, Cyprus and Israel, whose joint pipeline will eventually reach Italy through a secondary pipeline project. The EEZ signing comes as Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt have strengthened their relations at a time when Italy was acting unilaterally to serve their own interests. This changed however as Rome was becoming increasingly excluded from developments in the region. An example of this is Italy not having as much influence as they wanted over the war in Libya. By acting unilaterally, albeit not as aggressive as Turkey, Rome ran the risk of being completely left on the fringes of East Mediterranean issues. This is because Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt continued to make deals, improve multilateral relations and assert strong influence over events in the region.

The EEZ agreement was also a first such deal for Greece. Greece also shares a maritime border with Turkey, Cyprus, Egypt, Libya and Albania and now has a legal precedent which will quickly lead to Athens signing EEZ agreements with other neighbouring states, with some speculating Athens could sign one with Egypt as soon as next week.



Source: InfoBrics

In fact, the Libyan House of Representatives, based in the eastern city of Tobruk and in opposition to the Turkish-backed Muslim Brotherhood government in Tripoli, congratulated Greece and Italy on their peaceful resolution to their maritime border issues through international law. The Libyan House of Representatives then called on Greece to make a maritime EEZ agreement with them that would undermine the Turkey-Tripoli deal as it would be in accordance to the United Nations Charter Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

From the Greek perspective, the signing of an EEZ with Italy has massive ramifications for Turkey's plans to steal oil and gas from Greece's maritime zone – thus hindering its efforts for complete East Mediterranean dominance. In November last year, Turkey signed a maritime deal with the Muslim Brotherhood government in Libya to carve out Greece's oil and gas rich waters between them without acknowledging that islands were in EEZ. UNCLOS defends Greece's vision of how the EEZ between Greece and Turkey should look. However, this is rejected by Ankara who refuse to acknowledge that islands have an EEZ or continental shelves, and is the main reason why Turkey is one of only 15 countries in the whole world not to sign and/or ratify UNCLOS.

The biggest obstacle to the Turkey-Libyan Muslim Brotherhood pact will be the declaration of a Greek EEZ with Egypt. Greece and Italy resolved their EEZ borders by using international law, and it is expected that Greece and Egypt will also use UNCLOS. Meanwhile, the Turkey-Libya deal has been widely condemned, even from Turkey's closest allies like Germany, and has not received a single confirmation or support from outside of Ankara and Tripoli.

Turkish media, which is overwhelmingly controlled by the state, reacted negatively to the Greece-Italy deal knowing the ramifications it would have on Turkey's own ambitions to steal Greek maritime space.

Haber Global said “The move to escalate tension in the Eastern Mediterranean by Italy and Greece!”

Milliyet said “‘Greece seeks international support’ Panic in Greece!”

Haber 7 said “Greece and Italy agreed to establish an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) at a time when tensions escalated due to natural gas drilling work in the Eastern Mediterranean.”

Turkish Energy Minister Fatih Dönmez announced earlier this month that a drilling vessel of the Turkish Petroleum Corporation will start oil exploration operations to the immediate south of the Greek island of Crete “within three to four months.”

This prompted a flurry of responses from Athens, with Greek government spokesman Stelios Petsas saying “we are not afraid. We are getting prepared for any possibility;” Defence Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos saying “We do not want to go there, but we want to make it clear that we will do whatever it takes to defend our sovereign rights to the fullest extent possible;” and, General Konstantinos Floros saying that “the Greek Armed Forces are ready to fulfil their duty and carry out their mission of the Constitution from Evros to Kastellorizo if and when required.”

Greece wants to resolve issues diplomatically and peacefully, as it repeatedly calls to do with Turkey and has done so with Italy, but is willing to militarily fight against Turkey, a fellow NATO member, if its maritime space is violated. In light of the Greek-Italian EEZ deal it is unlikely that Turkey will provoke a war as Italy, one of the major powers in the European Union, has confirmed that islands do indeed have an EEZ despite Ankara’s objections.

The EU already showed support for Greece, with Josep Borrell, the European Union’s foreign policy chief, expressing condemnation against Turkey’s provocative actions.

“We are in close contact with our colleagues, the foreign ministers of Greece and also Cyprus, in order to follow the situation of the drillings, and we are calling on Turkey to stop drilling in the areas where there is the EEZ or territorial waters of Cyprus and Greece,” said Borrell, adding that the Foreign Affairs Council “already delivered a strong message addressed to Turkey.”

The question remains whether Turkey will risk a war with Greece by drilling for oil and gas in Greek maritime waters in the next three or four months. It likely will not happen as Turkey has no support in the EU, but a withdrawal will also demonstrate that Ankara is utterly failing in their project for East Mediterranean hegemony.

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