

Turkey's String of Pearls: Turkey's Overseas Naval Installations Reconfigure the Security Architecture of Mediterranean-Red Sea Corridor

Turkey will soon preside over an arc of blue-water power projection extending from Northern Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean to Qatar in the Persian Gulf that fundamentally alters the security architecture of the Middle East. Deftly combining soft power initiatives with the construction of coastal military installations in Sudan on the Red Sea and in Somalia on the Arabian Sea, Turkey has created a 'string of pearls' that directly challenges the power of Egypt-Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates alliance. With the military entrenchment of Turkey in the Horn of Africa, the Turkey-Qatar versus Egypt-Saudi Arabia-UAE competition has created an incendiary fault-line that now encompasses the entire Eastern Mediterranean-Red Sea maritime corridor.

Backed by Qatar, Turkey's maritime expansion is also a response to Egypt's trilateral strategic partnership with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, an alignment supported by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In this complex web of rival alliances that spans the Aegean and Arabian seas, any one of the previously localized conflicts could ignite a wider regional clash.

Turkey's String of Pearls

Turkey's blue-water expansion originates with the 2002 assumption of power by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by now Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Within the AKP's first two years, Ankara initiated a \$3 billion "National Warship" program, known by its Turkish acronym MILGEM, to expand Turkey's capability to deploy naval forces far from its coastal waters. At the September 2011 commissioning ceremony of MILGEM's first surface combatant, *TCG Heybeliada*, then Prime Minister Erdoğan openly declared his blue-water ambitions, defining Turkey's national interests as "residing in the Suez Canal, the adjacent seas, and from there extending to the Indian Ocean."¹ In March 2012, then Commander of the Turkish Navy, Admiral Murat Bilgel, outlined

Turkey's strategic objective "to operate not only in the littorals but also on the high seas," identifying the Turkish Navy's goals for the coming decade as "enhancing sea denial, forward presence, and limited power projection capacity."² Although long in the making, Turkey's maritime power projection was shaped in response to the Saudi-led coalition to blunt the expansion of Iranian hegemony in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen – most particularly, Qatar's breaking ranks from that Saudi-led coalition. With the consequent Qatar-blockade, the deep strategic partnership between Ankara and Doha became a full-fledged alliance that now constitutes its own power bloc in the Middle East and Africa.

Turkey's naval expansion along the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) between its southern shore and Qatar resembles, in miniature, China's "String of Pearls." Before Beijing branded its own maritime expansion initiative with the innocuous sounding "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (the "road" in China's current Belt and Road Initiative), the series of Chinese-built, dual-use port installations spanning westward across the Indian Ocean was dubbed by analysts as China's "String of Pearls." Encompassing China's SLOCs from the Malacca Strait to the Red Sea, China's String of Pearls includes installations on the coasts of Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, providing a formidable strategic challenge to India, China's chief naval rival in Asia. Unlike China, cash-strapped Turkey does not possess the resources to finance its maritime expansion to counter Egypt and its Gulf allies. To assemble its String of Pearls, Turkey has acted in concert with its strategic partner Qatar, the world's fifth largest natural gas producer.

Turkish Boots, Qatari Bank

Turkey's cooperation with Qatar in regional interventions evolved during the Arab Spring, particularly their efforts to topple the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad through the use of Islamist proxies.

The Turkish and Qatari initiatives were opposed by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the regime of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who ousted the Turkish and Qatari-backed Muslim Brotherhood government in July 2013. In 2014, Ankara and Doha signed an agreement for the deployment of Turkish forces in Qatar. Turkish and Qatari intervention in Syria was further set on its heels by the advances of Iranian-backed forces and Russia's September 2015 military intervention in support of Assad. Less than one month after the November 24 downing of a Russian combat jet in Syria by the Turkish Airforce, Turkey announced its plan to establish its first overseas military base in Qatar. Declaring during the December 2015 announcement that Turkey and Qatar "face common enemies," Turkey's Ambassador to Qatar Ahmet Demirok explained that Ankara and Doha "[A]re both very concerned about developments in the region and uncertain of the policies of other countries."³ With the onset of the 2017 Qatar blockade and the warming of Turkish-Russian relations as a result of the Astana process, the Egypt-Saudi Arabia-UAE bloc and its web of alliances has advanced to the forefront of Turkey and Qatar's regional concerns.

Turkey's \$39 million Tariq bin Ziyad base in Qatar opened in April 2016 and is intended to house 3,000 Turkish ground forces plus units from the Turkey's naval, air, and special operations forces. The base's establishment has set a general pattern for the Turkey-Qatar strategic symbiosis: Turkey provides the boots and Qatar provides the bank. Although Turkey is responsible for covering the base's expenses, Qatar has repeatedly intervened to support the Turkish economy. When Turkey's currency went into free fall during summer 2018 losing almost 40 percent of its value against the dollar, Qatar pledged \$15 billion⁴ of investments in the Turkish economy as well as a currency swap of up to \$3 billion.⁵ At a November 2018 Istanbul summit between President Erdoğan and the Qatari monarch Sheikh Tamim bin

Hamad al-Thani, the fourth meeting of the Qatar-Turkey Supreme Strategic Committee, Turkey's president thanked Qatar for Doha's support in the face of what Mr. Erdoğan described as "speculative initiatives targeting our economy."⁶ To which, Sheikh al-Thani replied, "[B]e assured, Mr. President, that if Turkey needs anything in the future we will always stand with our friends and brothers."⁷

Turkey's Somali Pearl: Ankara-Doha Alliance's Outpost Near the Gulf of Aden

A year and half after Turkey opened its Qatar base, then chief of staff of the Turkish army and current Turkish defense minister Hulusi Akar, officially opened Turkey's military facility in Mogadishu, Somalia. Turkey's \$50 million, 4 square km Mogadishu base is its largest training facility outside Anatolia, expected to train 10,000 Somali troops. Turkey is supplying weapons to the units of the Somali army that it trains, expanding the market for Turkish-manufactured arms.⁸ The Turkish military is able to house assets for its own naval, air, and ground forces. Turkey's Mogadishu base provides Ankara with a position reasonably close to the Gulf of Aden, the strategic eastern entry into the Red Sea critical for the operation of the Turkey-Qatar maritime partnership.

Turkey's military involvement in Somalia is accompanied by wide-ranging soft power initiatives, as demonstrated by the extensive humanitarian aid Turkey provided during Somalia's 2011 famine. President Erdogan visited Mogadishu twice, with his initial 2011 visit being the first arrival by non-African leader to war-ravaged Somalia in twenty years. Turkey has constructed hospitals, schools, and basic infrastructure in the country.

While less extensive than Turkey's involvement, Qatar is providing Somalia a \$200 million infrastructure aid package for the construction of two major highways, the rehabilitation of government buildings, and other development projects.⁹ Officially, Somalia declared its neutrality during the Qatar blockade after receiving a \$50 million aid package from Saudi Arabia

to pay for soldiers' salaries and rations. Nonetheless, Somalia's current president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, is widely perceived as aligned with Qatar and Turkey, having received funds from Doha for his 2017 election campaign.¹⁰ In response to Turkey and Qatar's increasing influence in Mogadishu, the UAE started funding Somalia's semi-autonomous breakaway regions of Somaliland and Puntland, investing \$440 million in Somaliland's Berbera port¹¹ and \$336 million in Puntland's Bosaso port.¹² With construction of rival maritime installations, the Horn of Africa's volatile coast has been transformed into a theater of conflict between the Turkey-Qatar and Egypt-Saudi Arabia-UAE blocs, rendering the decades' effort to ensure stability and governance in the region even more elusive.

Tarnished Pearl: Saudi Arabia and UAE push back on Turkey's Sudanese Port

The same year Turkey opened its Mogadishu facility, Ankara also sought to counter the Egypt-Saudi Arabia-UAE dominance in the Red Sea with President Erdoğan's historic December 2017 visit to Sudan. During this first visit to Sudan by an acting Turkish head of state, Sudan agreed to lease its Suakin port to Turkey for 99 years. Located 483 km (261 nautical miles) from Saudi Arabia's Jeddah port, Erdoğan declared that Turkey's reconstruction of the former Ottoman port would service Muslim pilgrims making the Hajj and promote Sudan's tourism industry. However, then Sudanese foreign minister Ibrahim Ghandour told the press that Khartoum had agreed to Ankara building a dual-use port "to maintain civilian and military vessels," adding that Turkey and Sudan had signed an agreement "that could result in any kind of military cooperation."¹³ Following the pattern of Ankara's relations with Mogadishu, Turkey's Suakin port acquisition, Turkey's development of military training facilities in Sudan, and its deployment of Turkish troops in-country are embedded within in a broader partnership in which Ankara provides \$650 million of development initiatives, including Turkey's construction of Khartoum's new international airport.

Egypt fears Turkey may support Sudan's claims to the Hala'ib triangle, the disputed border territory now under Egypt's control. In January 2017, Egypt had already inaugurated its new Southern Fleet Command, whose four bases extend down Egypt's Red Sea coast close to the Hala'ib triangle. After the announcement of Turkey's Suakin acquisition, Egypt sent hundreds of troops to the United Arab Emirates' base in Eritrea, located on the opposite coastal border with Sudan.¹⁴ With a massive naval, air, and ground force presence at its coastal base in Assab, Eritrea,¹⁵ the UAE launches air and sea operations against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen and transports of UAE troops and allied ground forces to the conflict zone.¹⁶ The presence of Turkish troops so close to the Saudi coast may have also prompted Saudi Arabia in 2018 to establish its first overseas base in Djibouti overlooking the Bab el Mandeb Strait, the strategic chokepoint between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.¹⁷

Turkey's use of Suakin as a naval facility has come under doubt since the April 11, 2019 ousting of President Omar al-Bashir that ended the Sudanese strongman's 30-year rule. On April 21 2019, Saudi Arabia and the UAE collectively pledged \$3 billion to the fledgling Transitional Military Council (TMC) led by Lt. General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, attempting to wean Sudan away from Turkey.¹⁸ Following the Saudi-Emirati pledge of financial support, al-Burhan declared that Suakin was "an inseparable part of Sudan," adding, "We emphasize that we care about the sovereignty of our territories. We will not accept the presence of a foreign military existence in Sudan."¹⁹

Subsequently, the TMC government has stated that it will uphold all previous agreements, treaties and charters signed by the previous Sudanese government.²⁰ Turkey's foreign ministry also issued an official statement declaring that the agreement between Ankara and Khartoum concerning Suakin was still operative. However, the statement simply affirmed that Turkey's Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Ankara's international development agency, was continuing its renovation work at the port,²¹ with no indi-

cation that Turkey's activities at Suakin will extend beyond its civilian aspects. If Saudi Arabia and the UAE succeed in preventing Turkey from developing a dual-use port at Suakin, it would constitute a minor strategic set-back for Turkey's naval operations. Turkey's overall effort to expand its blue-water power projection capabilities would not lose its momentum.

Cyprus: A Powder keg in the East Med-Red Corridor

Turkey's most important 'pearl' is North Cyprus, the ethnically Turkish-dominated part of the divided island where Ankara backs the unrecognized Turkish Republic of North Cyprus and maintains a military presence of over 30,000 troops. Turkish newspapers allied with President Erdoğan's AKP recently have reported on the possibility that Turkey may build a naval base in North Cyprus,²² a move that would permanently alter the prospects for Cyprus reunification.

Turkey's motivation for the base has been prompted, in part, by new natural gas finds off the coast of Greek-dominated South Cyprus administered by the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus government. Turkey claims to be defending the rights of Turkish Cypriots who have been excluded from Cyprus' offshore natural gas exploration efforts despite the constitutional status of the island's natural gas as being a shared resource of both communities. In late February 2018, the Turkish navy blockaded Italian energy giant ENI's drilling ship before it could reach its intended drilling site in Cypriot waters, forcing the company to withdraw the vessel.²³ ENI discovered Egypt's massive Zohr natural gas field adjacent to Cypriot territorial waters and, two weeks before the Turkish blockade, ENI announced a significant gas find in Cyprus' nearby Calypso field. Cairo and Nicosia have been cooperating to market Eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe using Egypt's Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) plants, bypassing Turkish involvement. Israel, which once had been considering an Israel-Turkey undersea gas pipeline, has likewise agreed to a sell Egypt gas for LNG export.

With expectations still high for a massive find, attention has turned to ExxonMobil's exploration of Cyprus' block 10, which shares the same reservoir rock bed as Zohr. On November 12, ExxonMobil's drillship arrived unmolested by Turkey at the drill site. While Turkey's restraint may be due to Qatar Petroleum's minority stake in ExxonMobil's venture, Ankara certainly did not want to antagonize Washington by interfering with the U.S.-based energy giant. The U.S. already maintains a base in Crete, less than 500 miles from Cyprus. At the end of 2018, Russia made claims that the U.S. is planning to establish a forward deployment base in Cyprus.²⁴ While Washing has not responded to the claims, the U.S. has increased its security footprint in the region with its December 13, 2018 inauguration of a U.S.-Greece Strategic Dialogue.

On February 28, 2019, ExxonMobil announced that it had made a gas discovery of in the Glaucus-1 well located in block 10.²⁵ With 142-227 bcm of in-place reserves, the Glaucus-1 discovery is the third noteworthy discovery in Cyprus. Combined with the approximately 320 bcm from its Calypso and Aphrodite fields, Cyprus now holds a more significant position in its energy partnerships with Egypt and Israel, and accordingly greater geopolitical importance for the EU and the United States.

On May 3, 2019, Turkey formally announced via NAVTEX, the international maritime navigational telex system, that Turkish ships would drill for natural gas off southern coast of the Republic of Cyprus, prompting warnings from Cyprus' regional partners as well as the United States and the European Union. The European Union's High Representative Frederica Mogherini issued a stern warning to Turkey, declaring, "we urgently call on Turkey to show restraint, respect the sovereign rights of Cyprus in its exclusive economic zone and refrain from any such illegal action to which the European Union will respond appropriately and in full solidarity with Cyprus."²⁶ At the time of writing, Turkey's exploration vessels and their support ships are located in Cyprus' exclusive

economic zone. The deployment of naval assets in Cypriot waters by any of Turkey's NATO allies, such as the United States or Greece, to force Turkey to withdraw from its game of brinkmanship, would provide Ankara with the pretext to establish a naval base in North Cyprus.

A More Volatile Mediterranean-Red Sea Corridor

Although active U.S. involvement could tip the scales in the Eastern Mediterranean in favor of Egypt-Greece-Cyprus alignment at Turkey's expense, Ankara is not without recourse. Even at this early stage of Turkey's maritime base-building initiative, Ankara's string of pearls affords a range of responses from imposing a strategic cost on Egypt in the Hala'ib triangle to imposing a cost on Cairo's Saudi and Emirati supporters by interfering in their prosecution of the war in Yemen. Turkey can also challenge Riyadh's grand ambition to construct the \$500 billion hi-tech city of Neom, as a cross-border business and tourism zone on the Red Sea that will link the Kingdom to Egypt and Jordan.

Turkey will soon be able to present a more formidable naval challenge when its light aircraft carrier the *TCG Anadolu* becomes operational in 2021. The *TCG Anadolu* is a landing helicopter dock (LHD) capable sailing non-stop for thirty days with a range of 1,700 nautical miles (3,148km), almost the distance between the Suez Canal and Mogadishu. As an amphibious assault ship, it will be able to transport a battalion-sized unit of 1,000 troops along with 150 vehicles, including battle tanks, for a marine landing.²⁷ A blue-water power projection vessel par excellence, the *TCG Anadolu* will augment Turkey's efforts to draw Kuwait and Oman into the Turkey-Qatar alignment, as both nations harbor deep concerns about the Saudi Arabi-UAE partnership in the wake of the Qatar blockade.

Even now, Turkey's advances have altered the strategic calculus of actors from Athens to Abu Dhabi. The linking of previously localized conflicts from the Aegean and Arabian seas along the Turkey-Qatar

versus Egypt-Saudi Arabia-UAE fault-line raises the probability that any future clash could develop into a wider regional conflict. Until a new equilibrium develops in the maritime security architecture, the Eastern Mediterranean-Red Sea corridor will be increasingly volatile.

Micha'el Tanchum is a Fellow at the Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Hebrew University and non-resident, affiliated scholar with the Centre for Strategic Studies at Başkent University in Ankara, Turkey (Başkent-SAM).

Follow @michaeltanchum

Notes

- 1) Micha'el Tanchum, "Sino-Saudi Red Sea Alignment for Turkey-China Cooperation," Turkish Policy Quarterly, April 7, 2017, <http://turkishpolicy.com/blog/20/sino-saudi-red-sea-alignment-presents-opportunity-for-turkey-china-cooperation>
- 2) Micha'el Tanchum, "A new Equilibrium: The Republic of Cyprus, Israel, and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean Strategic Architecture," Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO) Occasional Paper Series 1, 2015, p. 10
- 3) Tom Finn, "Turkey to set up Qatar military base to face common enemies," Reuters, December 16, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-turkey-military-idUSKBN0TZ17V20151216>
- 4) Orhan Coskun and Sarah Dadouch, "Qatar to invest \$15 billion in Turkey; source says banks the focus," Reuters, August 15, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-currency-qatar-investments/qatar-to-invest-15-billion-in-turkey-ankara-says-idUSKBN1L01P7>
- 5) David Dolan, "Turkey says central bank swap deal with Qatar to have \$3 billion limit," Reuters, August 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-currency-qatar/turkey-says-central-bank-swap-deal-with-qatar-to-have-3-billion-limit-idUSKCN1L50UK>
- 6) N.A., "Turkey and Qatar prove to be true friends, says Erdoğan," Hürriyet Daily News, November 27, 2018, <http://www.hurriyettailynews.com/turkey-and-qatar-prove-to-be-true-friends-says-erdogan-139210>
- 7) N.A., "Qatar, Turkey sign pacts to cement ties," Gulf Times, November 26, 2018, <https://www.gulf-times.com/story/614290/Qatar-Turkey-sign-pacts-to-cement-ties>
- 8) Harun Maruf, "Turkey gives Weapons to Somali Soldiers," Voice of America, January 5, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-gives-weapons-to-somali-soldiers-4193724.html>
- 9) N.A., "Somalia and the Gulf Crisis," International Crisis Group Report - No. 260/Africa, June 5, 2018 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/260-somalia-and-gulf-crisis>
- 10) Maggie Fick, "Harboring ambitions: Gulf states scramble for Somalia," Reuters, May 1, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-gulf-analysis/harboring-ambitions-gulf-states-scramble-for-somalia-idUSKBN1123B4>
- 11) Richard Wachman, "Somaliland backs Dubai's DP World over Berbera Port," Arab News, March 19, 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1269031/business-economy>
- 12) Charlie Mitchell, "UAE role is crucial, says Somali regional leader," The National, April 26, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/africa/uae-role-is-crucial-says-somali-regional-leader-1.725207>
- 13) Ali Kucukgocmen and Khalid Abdelaziz, "Turkey to restore Sudanese Red Sea port and build naval dock," Reuters, December 26, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-sudan-port/turkey-to-restore-sudanese-red-sea-port-and-build-naval-dock-idUSKBN1EK0ZC>

- 14) N.A., "Why are tensions rising in the Red Sea region?," Al-Jazeera, January 16, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/tensions-rising-red-sea-region-180109064758337.html>
- 15) N.A., "UAE joins an exclusive club," Stratfor, December 8, 2016, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/uae-joins-exclusive-club>
- 16) Frank Gardner, "UAE reinforcements in Eritrea ready to join Hedaydah battle," BBC News, June 15, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44500455>
- 17) N.A., "Djibouti on the Rise as Hub for Foreign Military Bases in Africa," Asharq Al-Awsat, September 10, 2018, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1390991/djibouti-rise-hub-foreign-military-bases-africa>
- 18) Khalid Abdelaziz, "Saudi Arabia, UAE to send \$3 billion in aid to Sudan," Reuters, April 21, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-protests/saudi-arabia-uae-to-send-3-billion-in-aid-to-sudan-idUSKCN1RX0DG>
- 19) Dorian Jones, "Analysts: Ouster of Sudanese Leader Hurts Ankara's Regional Goals," Voice of America, April 29, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/analysts-ouster-of-sudanese-leader-hurts-turkey-regional-goals/4896412.html>
- 20) Alarabiya.net, AlArabiya, 5 May 2019, www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/sudan/2019/05/05/
- 21) Zuhail Demirci and Beyza Binnur Donmez, "Turkey denies Suakin pact ends with Sudan," Anadolu Agency, April 26, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkey-denies-suakin-pact-ends-with-sudan/1463560>
- 22) Dorian Jones, "Reports of Planned Turkish Naval Base Stokes Tension Between Greek, Turkish Cypriots," Voice of America, December 4, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/reports-of-planned-turkish-naval-base-stokes-tension-between-greek-turkish-cypriots-/4686670.html>
- 23) N.A., "ENI ship blocked off Cyprus leaves," Ansa, February 23, 2018, http://www.ansa.it/english/news/business/2018/02/23/eni-ship-blocked-off-cyprus-leaves-3_3c4d2077-f068-4847-b5ed-d77f9ac4fad4.html
- 24) George Psyllides and Elias Hazou, "Russia tweets that US inspected military and strategic sites for base," Cyprus Mail, December 6, 2018, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2018/12/06/cyprus-rejects-suggestions-of-military-build-up/>
- 25) N.A., "ExxonMobil makes natural gas discovery offshore Cyprus," ExxonMobil News, February 28, 2019, https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/en/news/newsroom/news-releases/2019/0228_exxonmobil-makes-natural-gas-discovery-offshore-cyprus
- 26) N.A., "Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on Turkey's intended drilling activities within the exclusive economic zone of Cyprus," European Union External Action, May 4, 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/61836/statement-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-turkeys-intended-drilling_en
- 27) Micha'el Tanchum, "Turkey's New Carrier Alters Eastern Mediterranean Energy and Security Calculus," The Turkey Analyst, January 29, 2014, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/84-turkey%E2%80%99s-new-carrier-alters-eastern-mediterranean-energy-and-security-calculus.html>

© Austria Institut für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik, 2019

Alle Rechte vorbehalten. Nachdruck oder vergleichbare Verwendungen von Arbeiten des Austria Instituts für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik (AIES) sind auch in Auszügen nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung gestattet. Die im AIES-Fokus veröffentlichten Beiträge geben ausschließlich die Meinung der jeweiligen Autorinnen und Autoren wieder.

Dr. Langweg 3, 2410 Hainburg/Donau
Tel. +43 (1) 3583080
E-Mail: office@aies.at
Website: www.aies.at

Layout: Medienbüro Meyer