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Mavi Vatan, the "Blue Homeland"

The Origins, Influences and Limits of an Ambitious Doctrine for Turkey

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Abstract

Turkey's activism in the Eastern Mediterranean now appears to be guided by an ambitious legal and geopolitical doctrine, based on the claim of a vast maritime domain – the “Blue Homeland” or *Mavi Vatan* in Turkish. Developed by admirals of Turkey's Navy, who are aware of the strategic importance of the sea, this approach is influential among Turkey's military, political, economic, and intellectual elites. Although it presents certain contradictions with the traditional vision of the Islamo-conservatives, *Mavi Vatan* has been adopted by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, offering him the opportunity to consolidate his alliance with nationalist movements and to provide a legal framework for his action in Libya. However, the success of this doctrine also depends on Turkey's ability to modernize its naval forces, an effort that will require the maintenance of strong international partnerships.

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Introduction

On November 27, 2019 the Turkish Government signed an agreement with the Libya's Government of National Accord to establish a common maritime border. This event is a testament to Ankara's desire to become an important geopolitical actor in the Eastern Mediterranean. By strengthening Turkish-Libyan military cooperation and encroaching on Greece's claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ),¹ Turkey has shown it is not afraid of confrontation with those who would limit its maritime ambitions. This foreign-policy activism is not new, as it is part of the strategic vision of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AKP), which has been in power since 2002. However, while Turkey has been very active in the Middle East and Africa over the last two decades, its interest in maritime territory is relatively new and does not really fit the geopolitical vision developed by the AKP until now.

It is a doctrine coming from outside the party, that of a *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland), developed within the Turkish Navy, which now seems to guide Turkey's actions in the Mediterranean. The designers of this doctrine lay claim to Kemalism and defend an approach that does not identify with political Islam. Despite this, Turkey's government has adopted their vision and claims. Yet rather than being a major turning point, it may be seen as a foreign-policy shift driven by opportunistic events: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Prime Minister (2003-2014) and then President of the Republic (since 2014), has been accustomed to arbitrating among various strategic options put forward by his advisers. But his preference for *Mavi Vatan* is intriguing, as it is difficult to distinguish between what amounts to an ideological adherence and what may be more a communication strategy aimed at public opinion. There is no doubt that the proponents of this geopolitical doctrine share some immediate objectives of President Erdoğan. But it is not clear that he endorses their full vision in return. It may therefore be asked to what extent *Mavi Vatan* will influence Turkey's foreign policy choices, and how it will fit in, in a coherent way, with the AKP's strategic and ideological vision.

1. EEZs are defined by the Montego Bay Convention in Article 56, adopted by the United Nations on December 10, 1982. It refers to the maritime space that a riparian state exercising its sovereignty may use. The EEZ extends from a state's baseline to 200 nautical miles, or 370.42km, into the sea.

A Doctrine at the Crossroads of Maritime Law and Geostrategy

It is necessary to go back to the mid-2000s to trace the origins of *Mavi Vatan*. At that time, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP seemed intent on moving closer to the European Union (EU) and smoothing over disputes with Greece. They supported the Annan Plan to reunify Cyprus, whose northern part has been occupied by the Turkish army since 1974, demonstrating their goodwill, even though the Greek part of the island rejected the plan in 2004.² But this approach was not consensual, as some nationalist-minded officers feared that Turkish national interests would be sacrificed in exchange for hypothetical EU membership. Within the navy, an intellectual current emerged that has held ambitious territorial claims: *Mavi Vatan* is thus a legal vision, with a geopolitical vocation. Its scope is continental or even global.

Admirals as architects of the concept

The rejection of the Annan Plan did not prevent Cyprus's accession to the EU on May 1, 2004. The Cypriot authorities at the time were in the process of delineating and claiming their own Exclusive Economic Zone. To this end, they drew on the principles of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS, also known as the Montego Bay Convention. Gas discoveries in the region had increased the Mediterranean's economic attractiveness, and an agreement on the definition of the Egyptian-Cypriot maritime borders was signed in 2003. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), proclaimed in 1983 on the part of the island occupied by Turkey, and recognized only by Ankara, has openly opposed Cypriot maritime claims and has called for its own EEZ.³

On October 4, 2004, two geographers from the University of Seville (Spain), Juan Luis Suárez de Vivero and Juan Carlos Rodríguez Mateos, published an article on the EU's maritime borders, accompanied by a map highlighting Member States' EEZs, and

2. For a history of the Cyprus conflict see M. Bozdémir, "Chypre, entre panhellénisme et panturquisme," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, No. 48-49, 1988, p. 238-249; and M. Michael & Y. Vural (eds.), *Cyprus and the Roadmap for Peace: A Critical Interrogation of the Conflict*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2018.

3. A. Gürel, F. Mullen and H. Tzimitras, "The Cyprus Hydrocarbon Issue: Context, Positions and Future Scenarios", Report No. 1 of PRIO, 2013, p. 47.

validating Cypriot territorial claims.⁴ This “map of Seville” was highly criticized in Turkey, especially within the military. During a symposium organized by the Turkish Naval Forces Command in Ankara on October 14, 2006, Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, responsible for strategic planning at sea, criticized the EU for adopting the map in question without legal justification. He called on Turkey, which does not recognize the Montego Bay Convention, to defend a much larger EEZ, which he named as the “Blue Homeland.” This launched a real doctrine of territorial claims. From 2009 onwards, Admiral Cihat Yaycı has taken an interest in the outline of the EEZ claimed by Turkey, calling for a common maritime border with Libya.⁵ In a book co-authored with retired Colonel Ali Kurumahmut, then a government adviser, he set out in detail his views of maritime law, thus giving them some visibility.⁶

Cem Gürdeniz and Cihat Yaycı produced many publications over the following years, and the *Mavi Vatan* concept is becoming increasingly popular within the armed forces. It has notably been defended by Admiral Soner Polat (who died in 2019), and who himself devoted a book to this concept.⁷ One can also mention Admirals Özden Örnek, Mustafa Özbey or Cem Aziz Çakmak (who died in 2015), who have adhered to this doctrine and defended it publicly.⁸ Consecration within the military sphere came in 2019, when a large naval exercise was organized for the first time in Turkey’s three coastal seas (the Black, Aegean and Mediterranean Seas), taking the name “Mavi Vatan 2019”. The doctrine was then popularized among the general public, notably through publications related to the

4. This article was made public a few months later in the *Marine Policy* journal: J. R. Mateos and J. L. Suárez De Vivero, “Maritime Europe and EU Enlargement: A Geopolitical Perspective”, *Marine Policy*, Vol. 30, No. 2, March 2006, pp. 167-172.

5. G. Güler, “İyi ki Tümamiral Dr. Cihat Yaycı var...” [Fortunately there is Rear Admiral Dr. Cihat Yaycı...], *Önce Vatan*, December 24, 2019, available at: www.oncevatan.com.tr; C. Yaycı, “Doğu Akdeniz’de deniz yetki alanlarının sınırlandırılmasında Libya’nın rolü ve etkisi” [The role and influence of Libya in maritime security in the Mediterranean], *Güvenlik Stratejileri* [Stratégies de sécurité], Vol. 7, No. 14, 2011, pp. 17-41.

6. A. Kurumahmut and C. Yaycı, *Deniz subayları için temel deniz hukuku : Barış ve savaş dönemi* [Fundamental maritime law for navy officers: in times of peace and war], Çanakkale: Deniz Kuvvetleri Kültür, 2011.

7. S. Polat, *Mavi Vatan için jeopolitik rota: Doğu Akdeniz, Kıbrıs ve Ege’deki kavgayı anlatan tespitler ve öneriler* [A geopolitical course to Blue Homeland: findings and proposals on the conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus and the Aegean], İstanbul: Kaynak, 2019.

8 “Tümamiral Mustafa Özbey’den çağrı: Mavi Vatan okul müfredatına girsin” [An appeal by Rear-Admiral Mustafa Özbey: that Blue Homeland is included in school programs], *Aydınlık*, April 21, 2020; C. Gürdeniz, “Amiral Cem Aziz Çakmak’ı ‘Mavi Vatan’ın sonsuzluğuna uğurlarken” [Our farewell to Admiral Cem Aziz Çakmak who has departed to the eternal Blue Homeland], *Aydınlık*, July 4, 2015; Ö. Örnek, *Milgem’in öyküsü* [The Milgem history program], İstanbul: Kırmızı Kedi, 2016.

navy.⁹ It has been taken up by personalities from civil society, such as Necdet Pamir, Chairman of the Commission on Energy Policy, specializing in oil issues,¹⁰ or Hasan Ünal, a university academic and journalist, who has a close interest in this concept.¹¹ But, though the idea of *Mavi Vatan* is now widely used in academic, political, and economic discourses, it remains closely associated with the admirals who developed and spread it, namely Cem Gürdeniz, Cihat Yaycı, and, to a lesser extent, Soner Polat.

A territorial claim

The *Mavi Vatan* doctrine is, first and foremost, a rejection of Greek and Cypriot claims in the Eastern Mediterranean, and thus of the “Seville map” that the EU has implicitly accepted.¹² Its designers believe that the Montego Bay Convention has no legal value for Turkey, since Turkey has never signed or ratified it. They reject the Convention’s very principles, which are considered unsuitable for Mediterranean geography, especially because the EEZ limit of 200 nautical miles does not make sense in a confined space, dotted with islands.¹³ In such conditions, a state like Greece would have a huge maritime area, owing in part to its sovereignty over Mediterranean islands near the Turkish coast. The most telling example is the tiny archipelago of Kastellórizo (*Meis* in Turkish), a few kilometers off Kaş, which allows Athens to claim a vast maritime space between Rhodes and Cyprus, thereby blocking Turkey’s only opening to the Mediterranean.¹⁴ Moreover, by increasing the extension of territorial waters to 12 nautical miles (it had previously been 6 miles in the Aegean, following a Greek law of 1936 and a Turkish law of 1964), the Montego Bay Convention has favored States owning many nearby islands – of which Greece is the archetype.¹⁵ Considering the situation of Greek-Turkish territorial limits to be too specific, the admirals believe that the Montego Bay principles cannot be applied to it, and so support a special regime in the region.

9. For example, the journal of the Naval Forces Institute of the University of National Defense, whose first issue was released in 2019, was named *Mavi Vatan’dan açık denizlere* [From the Blue Homeland to open seas].

10. For example, he regularly expresses his support for *Mavi Vatan* on his Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/NecdetPamir>.

11. As shown by his Twitter tweets: <https://twitter.com/hasanunal1920>.

12. C. Gürdeniz, *Anavatan’dan Mavi Vatan’a* [From the Motherland to the Blue Homeland], Istanbul, Kırmızı Kedi, 2021, pp. 441-444.

13. C. Yaycı, *Doğu Akdeniz paylaşım mücadelesi ve Türkiye* [Turkey’s struggle for the sharing of the Eastern Mediterranean], Istanbul: Kırmızı Kedi, 2020, pp. 145-146.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

15. Y. Özer, “60 kere konuştuk anlatamadık! Türkiye does not istiyor? Yunanistan ne söylüyor?” [We have spoken 60 times without making ourselves understood! What does Turkey want? What does Greece say?], *Sözcü*, January 20, 2021.

Mavi Vatan also denies Athens the continental shelf it claims, which it uses to justify the extension of its EEZ. The Turks fear that Greece seeks to be an archipelago state, allowing it to extend its territorial seas to 12 miles beyond all its coasts. Although there are no formal claims from Athens for this, its decision to extend its territorial waters to 12 miles off its coast is portrayed as a *casus belli* by Ankara.¹⁶ *Mavi Vatan* defines Greece as a state that does indeed control islands off its coast, but which also has a well-identified continental base. Admiral Yaycı even considers that some Greek islands – those in the immediate vicinity of the Turkish coast in the Aegean and Mediterranean – actually belong to a continental shelf distinct from Greek territory.¹⁷ He thus insists that the island of Kastellórizo is directly part of an Anatolian continental shelf, not the Greek one: Athens’ sovereignty over that territory is not questioned, but the island cannot therefore serve as a basis for maritime claims, *let alone* for an EEZ. Cihat Yaycı also claims these islands should be demilitarized: “Which state is being targeted by the weapons there, if not Turkey?” he has asked.¹⁸ To support his critique, he draws on the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which ended the war between Turkey and the Allied powers (including Greece), and drew the borders of the present Turkish territory. According to him, the Treaty ceded the islands to Athens, but it also prohibited militarizing them. On this point, there is however a clear divergence of approach between the two parties. Indeed, the Greeks believe that the regime of total demilitarization of the islands of Limnos and Samothraki, confirmed by the Treaty of Lausanne, was linked to the total demilitarization of the Straits. However, the Montreux Convention (1936), authorized the rearmament of these Straits, and so also allowed the remilitarization of the two islands concerned. Moreover, with regard to the other islands, the Greeks consider that the Treaty of Lausanne only prohibits the installation of naval bases, by not the deployment of weapons.¹⁹ In addition, they recall that this treaty does not apply to the Dodecanese islands (neighbors of Rhodes). In 1923, they were under Italian sovereignty and were therefore not affected by the provisions adopted in Lausanne. These diverse ambiguities in the interpretation of the Treaties explain why *Mavi Vatan* supporters want to include demilitarization of the Greek islands in any potential negotiations.

16. “Turkey Says Greece’s Decision to Extend its Territorial Waters in Aegean Is Cause of War”, *Hürriyet DailyNews*, available at: www.hurriyetdailynews.com.

17. A. Denizeau, “Entretien avec le contre-amiral Cihat Yaycı : La patrie bleue : quand la Turquie regarde la mer », *Conflits*, No. 31, January-February 2021, pp. 64-65.

18. Interview with author (October 9, 2020).

19. P. Antonopoulos, “Greece Has A Legal Right to Not Demilitarize Aegean Islands Despite Turkey’s Insistence”, *Greek City Times*, September 30, 2020, available at: <https://greekcitytimes.com>.

Based on all of these factors, the territory claimed by the Turkish naval doctrine has been clearly defined by Cem Gülast and Cihat Yaycı.²⁰ The Blue Homeland thus claimed is “the name of the zone of [Turkish] interests and jurisdiction over fresh and sea waters between the 25th and 45th eastern meridians and the 33th and 43th northern parallels.”²¹ In the Black Sea, this zone corresponds to the EEZ already owned by Turkey, following the principles of equidistance with other riparian states. By contrast, it encroaches widely on the EEZs claimed by Cyprus and Greece. *Mavi Vatan* would thus extend to the eastern half of the Aegean Sea, without annexing the Greek islands there, but leaving them only with territorial waters defined by their current width (of 6 nautical miles). In the Mediterranean, *Mavi Vatan* would border the Libyan and Egyptian EEZs, with demarcation taking place according to the principle of equidistance between coasts. Finally, part of the waters between Cyprus, Syria and Lebanon is also claimed by the TRNC. Turkey and its northern Cypriot ally would thus have a naval domain extending over 462,000 km². According to the Blue Homeland doctrine, these claims should serve as the basis for any potential negotiation with other East Mediterranean states, in particular with Cyprus and Greece.

A maritime vision to serve ambitious geopolitics

Mavi Vatan theorists attach great importance to the sea in 21st century geopolitics, and call on Turkey to invest the space which it has neglected historically.²² Specifically, the Eastern Mediterranean appears to them be the focus of major power concerns. First, there is a security concern, particularly with respect to Turkey’s Greek neighbor. The latter is sometimes seen as an instrument of imperialist powers, not necessarily well defined, but in which the US is regularly recognized, and which would like to instrumentalize the Greek-Turkish rivalry to assert their dominance in the region – including at the expense of the Greek population.²³ Sometimes, too, Greece is described as an expansionist power seeking unification with Cyprus.

20. Maps of the domain so claimed can easily be found on the Internet, for example on the Turkish Wikipedia page dedicated to *the Mavi Vatan*, available at: <https://tr.wikipedia.org>.

21. C. Gürdeniz, “What Is the Blue Homeland in the 21st Century?” , United World, July 31, 2020, available at: <https://uwidata.com>.

22. T. Jossieran, “La Turquie et la Méditerranée : une relation houleuse”, *Stratégique*, No. 124, December 2020, pp. 74-76.

23. C. Gürdeniz, “The Greek People Keep Paying the Price”, United World, March 30, 2021, available at: <https://uwidata.com>; S. Polat, “Yunanista’ı akliselimelime davet!” [Inviting Greece to show common sense!], *Aydınlık*, December 26, 2018.

The Turks fear a resurgence of *Megali idea*,²⁴ a form of Greek irredentism that appeared in the 19th century, and which led Athens to claim the Ottoman territories with a Hellenophone substrate. This fear of Greece is accompanied by great mistrust of the Western world, justifying the establishment of a maritime zone of interest that allows the Turks to defend themselves if necessary.²⁵ In this context, sharing waters with Libya has become an essential part of Turkey’s national-security. On the one hand, it opens Turkey up to a neighborhood with a state seen as an ally, while on the other hand, and above all, it prevents the establishment of a continuous Cypriot-Hellenic maritime area, encircling almost the entire Anatolian peninsula and enclosing Turkey in its land space.²⁶ *Mavi Vatan* is thus a guarantee against the prospect of Cyprus joining Greece – the *Enosis* – a project that is linked more to a pan-Hellenic ideal than concrete policy, but which is presented by Turkish nationalists as a recurring threat.

Without being the sole motivation for its claims, Turkey’s economic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean are real. Competition to delimit EEZs in this region intensified with the discovery of large gas fields, and gas and oil explorations ships (such as the *Oruç Reis*) have been sent to probe its waters for hydrocarbons. By sending them into disputed areas, under the protection of its navy, Ankara has taken the opportunity to reassert its territorial claims. Turkey’s admirals are recalling the importance of the energy reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean and the need for access to them.²⁷ To be sure, the discovery of a large gas field (“*Sakarya*”)²⁸ in the Black Sea relativizes the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean as a hydrocarbon-supplying area. However, the idea is not just to exploit these resources, but also to control the transit pathways to Europe.²⁹

Finally, these ambitions are part of a broader geopolitical vision. Whereas former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (2009-2014) saw Anatolia as a hub between Europe, Africa, and Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean plays a similar role in the idea of the *Mavi Vatan*, straddling the Mediterranean basin, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific area. Being at the mouth of the Suez Canal, it is a mandatory

24. Interview by the author interview with Cihat Yaycı (October 9, 2020); C. Gürdeniz, “Megali idea’dan megalomaniye” [from the Megali idea to Megalomania], *VeryansinTV*, February 7, 2021, available at: www.veryansintv.com.

25. S. Polat, “Mavi Vatan sahipsiz mi?” [Without the Blue Homeland?], *Aydınlık*, January 16, 2018.

26. C. Gürdeniz, *Mavi Vata’nın Güney cephesi: Doğu Akdeniz* [The Southern Front of the Blue Homeland: The Eastern Mediterranean], Ankara: Pankuş, 2020, pp. 92-93.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 55-57; C. Yaycı, “Doğu Akdeniz paylaşım mücadelesi ve Türkiye”, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-30.

28. On the implications of this discovery, see H. S. Özertem, “Turkey’s New Gas Discovery in the Black Sea and Its Potential Implications,” *Éditoriaux de l’Ifri*, Ifri, October 1, 2020, available at: www.ifri.org.

29. C. Yaycı, *Doğu Akdeniz paylaşım mücadelesi ve Türkiye*, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.

point of passage for trade routes linking Europe to the Indian Ocean and, by extension, to Southeast Asia. It is also the main maritime interface of the near East and the Mashriq. As a result, Cyprus, which is at the heart of the EEZ claimed by Ankara, becomes a major strategic area.³⁰ Cihat Yaycı presents it as “the most important island in the Mediterranean in geopolitical and geostrategic terms”.³¹ For him it is a veritable “aircraft carrier,” providing easy access to Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. Considering that the heart of the Middle East is organized around a “triangle” between the Gulf of Alexandretta, the Gulf of Basra, and the Suez Canal, he points out that Cyprus controls one of the sides of this triangle (Alexandretta – Suez). For him, this explains the willingness of outside powers like the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, and France to be involved in Cyprus.³² This factor highlights why supporters of *Mavi Vatan* resolutely oppose the reunification of Cyprus:³³ Turkey, they argue, must retain its position in the north and defend the corresponding EEZ. In doing so, it will retain control of the eastern Mediterranean basin, and thus of the large intercontinental maritime shipping routes. So, while the Blue Homeland is primarily about defending a specific territory, it is also seen as a tool of strategic, economic, and geopolitical interests. In doing so, *Mavi Vatan* is the basis for a comprehensive foreign policy, whose orientations influence different ideological movements in Turkey.

30. T. Jossieran, “La Turquie et la Méditerranée : une relation houleuse”, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-84.

31. C. Yaycı, *Doğu Akdeniz paylaşım mücadelesi ve Türkiye*, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

33. M. Caillaud, “Qu’est-ce que la patrie bleue ? Une conversation avec l’idéologue de la doctrine géopolitique turque”, *Le Grand Continent*, Octobre 26, 2020, available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu>.

***Mavi Vatan's* Influence on Geopolitical Thinking in Turkey**

The theories developed by these high-ranking members of the navy are new in Turkey, and their growing popularity suggests they should be viewed as a new dimension to the country's foreign policy. However, this impression must be tempered. To be sure, *Mavi Vatan* sets out a certain world view. But its geographic focus makes it inherently insufficient to constitute a comprehensive strategy. Moreover, although its influence with the nationalist fringe of public opinion, particularly with sovereignists and Eurasianists is undeniable, *Mavi Vatan* occupies a sphere that is distinct from political Islam. As a result, its principles of action may contradict the goals displayed by the heirs to a politico-religious vision of Turkish interests, held by many in the circles of power.

A geopolitical concept with a global vocation but centered on one region

Defining *Mavi Vatan* is only relevant as a complete doctrine, with its own theoretical analysis and principles of action, in the Eastern Mediterranean and the geopolitical spaces that surround it. Blue Homeland highlights the importance of this area, and pursues the issues at stake in this vicinity, and hence the potential it holds out for riparian states. *Mavi Vatan* clearly identifies the strategic points to be controlled – the coastal space, the sea border with Libya, Cyprus, and the surrounding waters. And it defines a tool for this: a vast EEZ that must become the Blue Homeland. This strategic vision hinges on a military logic, which does not preclude the use of force to impose its views. In line with the War of Independence (1919-1922) and the reclaiming of Anatolia, Turkey must rely on its armed forces to recover the Blue Homeland which envelopes it. This implies a modernization of the fleet and the opening of naval bases facilitating its projection.³⁴ This militarization of the doctrine is attributable to a diplomatic representation that categorizes Mediterranean countries into three groups: allies, structural adversaries and occasional adversaries.

34. T. Jossieran, "La Turquie et la Méditerranée : une relation houleuse", *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81.

According to the admirals, the first group – the Allies – includes two reliable members. The first is Libya, at the heart of Cihat Yaycı’s strategy. It should be noted that his initial analyzes on this subject date back to 2009-2011, in other words even before the fall of Muammar el-Qaddafi (1969-2011). In the logic of *Mavi Vatan*, it is not a particular regime that is privileged, but Libya as such, regardless of the power in place, because of its geographical position. Libya’s interests encourage it to define an EEZ that is contiguous with Turkey’s, in order not to be isolated by a Greek-Egyptian axis. The other ally identified by the admirals is the TRNC, the “southern fortress of *Mavi Vatan*.”³⁵

The structural adversaries are Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, perceived as pincers that the Blue Homeland EEZ must remove. To return to peaceful relations, Athens must renounce its maritime claims and recognize the validity of Turkish demands. It must accept a sharing of Aegean waters, the demilitarization of its islands near the Anatolian coast, and the recognition of the Turkish-Libyan maritime border.

Finally, there are the occasional opponents: the riparian states (Italy, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria) that have rallied to the Greek position. *Mavi Vatan* theorists argue that these countries’ interests should instead push them to cooperate with Ankara. Cihat Yaycı points out that by adopting the principles of Montego Bay rather than the delimitations proposed by Turkey, Egypt deprives itself of 21,500 km², Israel of 4,600 km² and Lebanon of 3,957 km² of EEZs.³⁶ There is an understated criticism in this discourse of Turkey’s policy toward these countries: Cem Gürdeniz believes that Turkey should not break with Egypt or Israel.³⁷ He also favors reconciliation with Syria, as did Soner Polat, who criticized Turkey’s support for Syrian rebels against Bashar al-Assad.³⁸

But, while *Mavi Vatan* offers a specific logic of action in the Eastern Mediterranean, its approach to the rest of the world is a far less robust. Turkey’s relationship with Africa shows this quite well, for example. The admirals point to the importance of this continent, for which Turkey has been showing growing interest since the late 2000s.³⁹ In particular, they argue that control of the Eastern Mediterranean secures the channels of communication to the Horn of

35. EMC Gürdeniz, *Anavatan’dan Mavi Vatan’a*, p. 274.

36. C. Yaycı, *Doğu Akdeniz paylaşım mücadelesi ve Türkiye*, op. cit., pp. 166-168.

37. “Tensions en Méditerranée. La France verse de l’huile sur le feu, accuse un ex-amiral turc”, *Ouest-France*, August 23, 2020.

38. S. Polat, “ABD ve İsrail’e dolaylı hizmet”, *Aydınlık*, April 14, 2018.

39. B. Balci, “La diplomatie active mais fragile de la Turquie en Afrique”, *Questions internationales*, No. 77, January-February 2016, pp. 96-101.

Africa, a region heavily invested by the Turks.⁴⁰ But no further details are given about the strategy for this region. *Mavi Vatan* does not set out any principles for action towards African countries,⁴¹ as it does for the Mediterranean basin. In this context, Turkey’s activities in sub-Saharan Africa remain deeply influenced by the precepts of Ahmet Davutoğlu, including: a pro-active policy with proliferating initiatives; a multi-dimensional approach that combines political relations, economic cooperation, and cultural ties; and an emphasis on soft power which also relies on non-state actors.

Finally, the admirals’ rhetoric remains relatively vague about the involvement of foreign actors in the Eastern Mediterranean. Fundamentally, the idea developed is that of non-intervention: the notion of associating the EU in Greek-Turkish talks is thus vigorously rejected.⁴² That said, the relationships with US and Russian power are more nuanced. As far as the Atlantic Alliance is concerned, *Mavi Vatan* theorists do not have a uniform approach. Soner Polat had developed a very critical discourse on NATO and the “Atlantists,” whom he regularly criticized for destabilizing Turkey. Cem Gürdeniz has shared these criticisms, believing that NATO no longer has a reason to exist. However, he also believes that remaining in the Alliance can help Turkey balance the influence of Greece and its allies there.⁴³ Cihat Yaycı, for his part, does not openly criticize NATO and is not calling for withdrawal. But he does demand that Turkey be treated “at its fair value.” The same caution exists concerning relations with Russia, with similar nuances between Turkish admirals. Whereas Soner Polat was a declared supporter of a Russian alliance,⁴⁴ Cem Gürdeniz instead proposes a rapprochement with Russia, aimed at counterbalancing NATO’s aims, and agreeing on tactical interests – particularly the management of the Syrian and Libyan crises.⁴⁵ Cihat Yaycı follows more the general willingness to cooperate with Moscow, which is perceived to be compatible with Western alliances. In short, while the *Mavi Vatan* discourse seems very hostile to NATO and rather favorable to Russia, it is not accompanied by clear prescriptions, and so is insufficient in explaining Turkey’s positions in these power games.

40. A. Denizeau, “Entretien avec le contre-amiral Cihat Yaycı: The Blue Homeland: When Turkey Looks at the Sea,” *op. cit.*; A. Pouvreau, “Turkey in the Horn of Africa”, *Conflicts*, No. 30, November-December 2020, pp. 58-60.

41. This of course excludes those countries with which Turkey has territorial claims, namely, mainly Egypt and Libya.

42. Cem Gürdeniz, interview with author (January 21, 2021).

43. M. Caillaud, “Qu’est-ce que la patrie bleue ? Une conversation avec l’idéologue de la doctrine géopolitique turque”, *op. cit.*

44. S. Polat, “Jeopolitik ve Rusya” [Geopolitics and Russia], *Aydınlık*, April 3, 2018.

45. In particular, he has developed this dimension in a video communication for Youtube’s “Öğrenci İşleri” account, which can be found at: www.youtube.com.

A doctrine complementary to Eurasianism and nationalism

In the vision of its designers, *Mavi Vatan* does not relate to a specific set of ideas. Cihat Yaycı presents it as a legal vision and distinguishes it from ideological movements such as Atlanticism, Eurasianism or neo-Ottomanism.⁴⁶ For Cem Gürdeniz, it is a new *Misak-ı Milli* (“National Pact”, referring to the proclamation of the Ottoman Parliament on February 12, 1920 which rejected the European occupation and legitimized Turkey’s independence cause). The Pact’s consensus vision transcended the “neo-Ottoman illusion” and Mustafa Kemal’s “revisionist realism”.⁴⁷ In other words, Blue Homeland is a doctrine that unites the entire Turkish nation. For this reason, he believes that no government, whatever its policy, can afford to ignore *Mavi Vatan*, lest it loses its legitimacy.⁴⁸ And indeed, it may be noted that the concept of Blue Homeland is popular among diverse ideological movements. Having been adopted by President Erdoğan, it is also supported by the Kemalist CHP party (the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* or Republican People’s Party), Turkey’s main opposition force.⁴⁹ But it is with the nationalists that *Mavi Vatan* seems to have most success, be it parties traditionally linked to this political line, to the most mysterious Eurasian movement.

The geopolitics of the Mediterranean theorized by the admirals is indeed perfectly compatible in the first instance with the historical vision of the Nationalist Movement Party [*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, or MHP], led since 1997 by Devlet Bahçeli. It was this movement that most criticized the AKP’s support for the Annan Plan for Cyprus in 2004.⁵⁰ Like admirals, the MHP considers Greek claims to be a fundamental threat to Turkey, and has criticized the deterioration of relations with Egypt, Israel, and Syria. Devlet Bahçeli’s choice to ally himself in 2017 with the AKP and with President Erdoğan led to a split within the party and the birth of a nationalist opposition organization, the Good Party [*İyi Party*, İYİ], which is more committed to secularism. Despite their rivalry, the two parties support the *Mavi Vatan* doctrine. The idea of a 460,000 m² EEZ is thus regularly taken up by Devlet Bahçeli in his actions. The MHP’s unique position in parliament (its 50 MPs are needed by the AKP to retain a governmental majority) allows it to influence decisions and defend this geopolitical vision. Despite its opposition to the

46. Interview with author, November 7, 2020.

47. C. Gürdeniz, *Anavatan’dan Mavi Vatan’a*, pp. 367-369.

48. Interview with author, January 16, 2020.

49. “Kılıçdaroğlu: Mavi Vata’ı korumak zorundayız” [Kılıçdaroğlu: we must protect the Blue Homeland], *Kıbrıs Postası*, January 14, 2020.

50. “Bahçeli: Annan planı Rumların eve dönüş planı” [Bahçeli: The Annan Plan is a Plan of Return to the House of the Greeks], *Hürriyet*, April 22, 2004.

government, Meral Akşener, the leader of the İYİ, also supports Blue Homeland and Turkey’s positions on Northern Cyprus.

It is the Eurasianist movement, rather than the positions of the two nationalist warring brothers, that has attracted the interest of international observers. Indeed, the theorists of this original geopolitical vision,⁵¹ which advocates Turkey’s rapprochement with Russia, Iran, or even China, seem to have close ties with *Mavi Vatan*. The most striking example was Admiral Soner Polat, who was Vice-President of the *Vatan Partisi* (Homeland Party), Turkey’s main Eurasianist party from 2015 onwards. Indeed, he had excellent relations with Alexander Douguine, the main contemporary figure in Russian Eurasianism.⁵² The *Aydınlık* newspaper, which is very close to the *Vatan Partisi*, has largely opened its columns to supporters of the Blue Homeland. For their part, Cem Gürdeniz and Cihat Yaycı do not follow this ideology. But their criticism of NATO and their willingness to move closer to Russia and China do converge on the vision put forward by *Vatan Partisi*.⁵³ While focused on two different geopolitical areas, *Mavi Vatan* and Eurasianism thus seem complementary, cultivating a common sense of distrust of Western powers and advocating the need for alternative partnerships. Without conflating the two visions, one can see that there is no major point of discordance among them, and indeed some concordance of views unites their respective zealots. This ideological closeness is important, because the growing influence of Eurasianists in the circles of power circles can offset the weight of Islamic-conservatives, who have traditionally been more suspicious of strategic military theories.

Potential contradictions with political Islam

Though well-received by nationalists, the *Mavi Vatan* doctrine seems more difficult to reconcile with religious vision of Turkey’s foreign policy. First, it should be noted that its artisans are highly critical of political Islam as well as its diplomatic and ideological legacy. Fundamentally, the strategy they propose contrasts with many of the orientations inherited from the 2000s. Under the leadership of AKP, leaders like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Ahmet Davutoğlu, and former President Abdullah Gül (2007-2014), Turkish political Islam had

51. On Turkish Eurasianism, see B. Balci, “L’eurasisme et le rapprochement entre la Turquie et la Russie”, *Revue Internationale et Stratégique*, Vol. 116, No. 4, 2019, pp. 134-145; Ö. Tüfekçi, *The Foreign Policy of Modern Turkey: Power and the Ideology of Eurasianism*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2017.

52. “İran, Suriye ve Rusya Soner Polat’ı unutmadı” [Iran, Syria and Russia have not forgotten Soner Polat], *Aydınlık*, October 1, 2019.

53. D. Martín Menjón, “The Mind behind the Blue Homeland”, *Quixote Globe*, September 6, 2020, available at: <https://quixoteglobe.com>.

developed several key foreign-policy principles. First, the military was to be pushed out of policy as far as possible, in order to put politics back in command. The return of civilian power in decision-making was supported by European institutions, leading the AKP in turn to propose a more peaceful approach to litigation with Greece and on the question of Cyprus. Then, and especially after the Arab revolutions of 2011, this approach became tinged by confessionalism. Turkey saw itself a champion of Sunni populations oppressed either by dictatorial regimes (President El-Sisi in Egypt or Bashar al-Assad in Syria), or by Israel and its allies.

But *Mavi Vatan*'s project is virtually in complete opposition to these positions. Its theorists, stemming directly from the navy, embody the return of the military, laying claim to Turkey's political tradition of secularism and dissociating themselves from political Islam.⁵⁴ Their hostility to previous attempts at rapprochement with Greece puts them at odds with some of the top Islamic conservatives. Thus, in July 2020, İbrahim Kalın, the spokesman for President Erdoğan and an adherent of political Islam, was strongly criticized by Cem Gürdeniz for proposing negotiations in Athens without preconditions.⁵⁵ But it is especially on the question of regional alliances that real differences with political Islam may emerge. *Mavi Vatan*'s defense principles include a willingness to negotiate with Egypt, Israel, and Syria. But the causes of the Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the Palestinians, and the Syrian rebels have taken on a very strong symbolic dimension for supporters of Turkey's political Islam, and one wonders whether they are willing to accept such reconciliation processes. This is especially so as Cem Gürdeniz and Soner Polat have also strongly criticized the alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood, which they believe was contrary to Turkish national interests.⁵⁶ It is therefore possible that over the medium term, Islamic conservatives close to power centers could distance themselves from *Mavi Vatan* and find themselves in opposition to the MHP and its associates, leaving President Erdoğan in the position to arbitrate.

54. D. Minoui, “Comment Erdogan a mis l'armée turque au service de son expansionnisme”, *Le Figaro*, November 4, 2020.

55. “Cem Gürdeniz'den İbrahim Kalı'a 'kıta sahanlığı' tepkisi”, [Cem Gürdeniz's reaction to İbrahim Kalın's 'continental shelf'], *Aydınlık*, July 29, 2020.

56. S. Polat, “Hayat devam ediyor”, [Life goes on], Vatan Partisi press release (online), available at: <https://vatanpartisi.org.tr>; F. Yılmaz, “Türkiye-Mısır yakınlaşmasını E. Tümamiral CEM Gürdeniz değerlendirdi: 'İhvan siyaseti Türkiye'ye çok büyük zararlar verdi' » [The views of Rear Admiral Cem Gürdeniz on Turkey's rapprochement with Egypt: 'the politics of the Brotherhood has caused a lot of damage to Turkey'], *Oda TV*, March 12, 2021, available at: <https://odatv4.com>.

A Concept in the Hands of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

While the support of the MHP or of the nationalist and Kemalist opposition to the *Mavi Vatan* concept has a certain ideological coherence, it may seem curious that President Erdoğan, coming from Turkish political Islam, has made it one of his foreign-policy priorities. Rather than being based on ideological closeness, the Head of State's adherence to this maritime doctrine seems to follow two sets of immediate considerations: domestically, this involves his rapprochement with the military and nationalist movements; externally, the regional context of the Eastern Mediterranean is one of much tension. But if these parameters change, it is difficult to know how much the principles theorized by Turkey's admirals will continue to influence Turkish strategy.

An issue in domestic politics

The President of the Republic's adoption of *Mavi Vatan* must firstly be viewed as the translation of a vast reversal of political alliances. Until the early 2010s, and with the aim of driving out the old Kemalist elites from state institutions, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan maintained an informal alliance with followers of Fethullah Gülen, a refugee preacher residing in the US since 1999. Gülen's followers, who more or less formed an informal brotherhood,⁵⁷ had integrated the machinery of the state, obtaining high-ranking posts in the police, the army, academia, and Turkey's justice system. In their desire to oust Kemalists – shared by the AKP – these active militants quickly ran up against traditional army cadres. Fethullah Gülen and his followers thus became the *bête noire* of *Mavi Vatan* theorists, who viewed this brotherhood as a movement serving “Euro-Atlantic” interests in order to weaken Turkey by striking its military.⁵⁸ This underground conflict has had very concrete repercussions. In 2011, following the discovery of a supposed plot by Kemalist military elites against the AKP government (the Balyoz affair), more than 200 officers were given to heavy prison sentences. They included Cem Gürdeniz and Soner Polat. But, starting in 2012, relations between Gülen's brotherhood and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan become more complicated, and their

57. The term “brotherhood” does not exactly reflect the reality of this movement: it is more a network of associations, economic structures, private schools, and the media, all linked via their cadres and founders to the person of Fethullah Gülen.

58. N. Rodríguez, “CEM Gürdeniz: ‘Maritime Turkey Represents the Whole Turkish World from Central Asia to the Balkans’”, *Quixote Globe*, September 6, 2020, available at: <https://quixoteglobe.com>.

growing rivalry culminated with the failed coup of 2016, which the AKPs attributed directly to Gülen and his followers. A gradual rapprochement between the military and AKP powerholders has begun since then. Turkey’s judiciary invalidated the convictions of the Balyoz trial, which has since been denounced as a plot by the Gülenists, and liberated the imprisoned officers. While the failed coup in 2016 was followed by the takeover of military institutions, it also enabled *Mavi Vatan* supporters to enter power circles. Thousands of supposed Gülen supporters were driven out of government ministries, facilitating the entry of nationalists and Eurasianists, who have pressed Blue Homeland to be put on the defense agenda. On a broader level, the breakdown of peace negotiations with the PKK,⁵⁹ the rapprochement with the army, and the nationalist turn of the presidential discourse have all helped to build an alliance between the AKP and the MHP, enabling the latter to advance its strategic and diplomatic views.

Moreover, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s instrumentalization foreign-policy should also be taken into account, and his choices have often aimed at satisfying various factions of Turkey’s electorate. For example, in the early 2000s, he joined the EU accession process, which was very popular at the time, particularly among liberals.⁶⁰ Likewise, the opening to Arab countries, especially Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, was motivated by geopolitical concerns, and was a response to Turkey’s conservative, small business community which wanted to increase exports to the region.⁶¹ The public that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is targeting by taking up the *Mavi Vatan* theme is not limited to the nationalist supporters of the MHP, even if their alliance remains necessary. In fact, he is championing a sovereignist vision that is still very popular in Turkey, including in the opposition. In doing so, this move could complicate the CHP’s attempts to rally İYİ nationalists – or even the MHP, should Devlet Bahçeli abandon its presidency – in view of future elections.

A favorable strategic context for the *Mavi Vatan*

President Erdoğan has also responded to regional events that have put maritime issues center stage, amid a dramatic rise in tensions.

59. *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* [Kurdistan Workers’ Party, PKK], a Kurdish autonomist movement considered as a terrorist organization by Turkey and its Western partners.

60. A. Bonzon, “En Turquie, les intellectuels libéraux ont-ils joué les ‘idiots utiles’ des islamistes ?,” *Slate*, January 4, 2014, available at: www.slate.fr; A. Insel, *La Nouvelle Turquie d’Erdoğan : du rêve démocratique à la dérive autoritaire*, Paris: La Découverte, 2015, pp. 95-100.

61. C. Sitzenstuhl, *La Diplomatie turque au Moyen-Orient : héritages et ambitions du gouvernement de l’AKP 2002-2010*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2011, pp. 106-116.

The discovery of gas deposits by Israel (2009) and then Cyprus (2011) had illustrated the energy potential of the eastern Mediterranean. But it was really Egypt’s discovery of the large Zohr deposit (in 2015) that prompted local powers to establish a water-control strategy. For Turkey, the gas question reached crisis proportions when the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on January 14, 2019 the establishment of an Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum. Egypt, Cyprus, Israel and Palestine, as producers, and Greece, Jordan and Italy, importers, are members of this discussion platform, but Turkey was not invited. Turkey’s sense of being pushed aside has been all the stronger as the Athens-Cairo axis that led the initiative was the direct result of the breakdown of Turkish-Egyptian diplomatic relations after President El-Sisi’s coup.⁶² In August 2017, Cihat Yaycı was appointed Chief of Staff of the Naval Forces Command. Within this specific context, the EEZ proposal he had outlined ten years previously gained popularity. Indeed, it would see Turkey become a compulsory route of passage between the Forum’s producing countries, on the one hand, and European consumers (Greece and Italy), on the other. This solution has been all the more welcomed by Turkey’s president as it is compatible with his own Libyan policy.

Indeed, Libya is the key to convergence between the admirals supporting *Mavi Vatan* and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. After the fall of Muammar el-Qaddafi’s, Turkey (backed by Qatar), has sided with Libya’s Muslim Brotherhood. Though in a minority in the general elections of 2014, they established an autonomous government in Tripoli (Tripolitania, West), while the new parliament settled in Tobruk (Cyrenaica, East).⁶³ In the spring of 2019, the western offensive of Field Marshal Haftar, a strongman of the Tobruk regime, led Turkey to step up its support for the Tripoli government, led by Fayeze al-Sarraj (2016-2021).⁶⁴ This is where Cihat Yaycı’s proposed Turkish-Libyan territorial division gained interest in Erdoğan’s eyes. The November 28, 2019 agreement, which delineates an EEZ with Libya, allowed him to kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, he could position himself as the strongman standing up for Turkish national interests, by blocking the establishment of a Helleno-Egyptian territorial axis. On the other hand, Erdoğan thus also formalized and legitimized Turkey’s cooperation with the government in Tripoli. *Mavi Vatan* thus became the AKP’s instrument for supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in the face of Marshal Haftar.

62. T. Zenonas, “The New Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral Partnerships and Regional Security”, PRIO Report No. 3, 2019, p. 105.

63. In April 2019, the parliament left Tobruk for Benghazi, another city in Cyrenaica, closer to the Tripolitania.

64. C. Fabre and D. Schmid, “Soutien turco-qatari au gouvernement Sarraj : de la convergence idéologique à l’alliance pragmatique et financière”, *Diplomatie*, No. 107, January-February 2021, pp. 51-52.

The latter had received diplomatic, logistical, and probably military backing from Egypt,⁶⁵ while Turkey’s government sees the Libyan conflict as an opportunity to thwart President El-Sisi’s plans. The landing of Turkish troops in Libya in January 2020 had two reasons: to avoid the fall of the al-Sarraj government and securing the EEZ agreement, while fighting against forces backed by Egypt.

Consequently, in the summer of 2020, there emerged what some observers have called a “great Mediterranean game,” as two camps became increasingly prominent in the Eastern Mediterranean, while outsiders were being asked to take sides.⁶⁶ A maritime delimitation agreement signed on August 6, 2020 between Greece and Egypt appeared to be a direct response to the Turkish-Libyan treaty. In January 2020, France asked to join the Gas Forum (its admission being formalized on March 9, 2021), and has condemned Turkish policy, while announcing a “strategic security partnership” with Greece. Accordingly, it is perceived as an ally of Athens.⁶⁷ This new French stance has increased tensions with Turkey, which were already high. On June 10, 2020, a serious naval incident off the Libyan coast marked the acme of the Franco-Turkish crisis. As a French frigate (the *Courbet*) was preparing to inspect a Turkish cargo ship as part of *Operation Sea Guardian* (a NATO mission to prevent arms smuggling into Libya), it faced intimidating maneuvers by the Turkish Navy. Versions differ on the exact timing of the standoff: France accused Turkey of “illuminating” (marking a target to prepare for firing) the *Courbet*, while Turkey claims to have simply “designated” the frigate (a less hostile form of marking).⁶⁸ In any case, this incident was deemed serious enough for France to withdraw from *Sea Guardian*. Three months later, Greece’s announcement of a contract to purchase the French fighter Rafale confirmed the consolidation of a Paris-Athens axis.⁶⁹

The pattern of emerging alliances is therefore not favorable to Turkey: although the US and some European powers, such as Germany or Spain, are not taking a stand against it. Only the Tripoli government and the TRNC are openly supporting Turkey in the

65. A. Poletti, “Libye : pourquoi l’Égypte d’Abdel Fattah al-Sissi soutient le maréchal Haftar”, *Jeune Afrique*, November 12, 2019.

66. Special report: “Libye: Le grand jeu méditerranéen”, *Moyen-Orient*, No. 49, January-March 2021, pp. 15-71; L. Lefebvre, “En Libye, ce Grand Jeu qui n’en finit plus”, *Paris Match*, July 6, 2020.

67. L. Lagneau, “La coopération militaire entre la France et la Grèce va entrer dans une nouvelle ère, selon Mme Parly”, *Opex360* (online), February 2020, available at: www.opex360.com.

68. S. Ersöz, “Çirkin’ gerginliği” [Tensions over ‘Çirkin’ freighter], *Milliyet*, June 19, 2020; J.-D. Merchet, “Comment s’est déroulé l’incident naval entre la France et la Turquie,” *Opinion*, June 19, 2020.

69. M. Cabriol, “La Grèce va acheter 18 Rafale à la France”, *La Tribune*, September 12, 2020.

Mediterranean. It is in this context that President Erdoğan is listening to alternative recommendations of other *Mavi Vatan* theorists, including trying to reach out to some Mediterranean powers, such as Egypt or Israel, in order to isolate Greece. Throughout the following fall, discreet talks took place with both countries. While talks with Israel continued without any concrete results, a spectacular reconciliation with Egypt was announced in March 2021, leading President El-Sisi to consider a new approach to maritime borders.⁷⁰ In return, Turkey’s government is asking the members of the Muslim Brotherhood exiled in Turkey to moderate their criticism of the Egyptian regime.⁷¹ These developments are very well received by the admirals, who see them a victory of their theories.⁷² In this instance, *Mavi Vatan* has served Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as a geopolitical compass to respond to a specific strategic context in the Mediterranean.

More limited influence than apparent

While Turkey’s president has been able to use the admirals’ ideas in a favorable moment, he wants to remain in control, and has made this known repeatedly. The first sign of this was the resignation which he forced on Cihat Yaycı on May 7, 2019. The reasons for the Head of the Navy’s fall from grace are not well identified. Some *Mavi Vatan* supporters, like Cem Gürdeniz or Mustafa Özbey, suspect manipulation by relatives of Fethullah Gülen.⁷³ Other observers have referred to personal disagreements with Defense Minister Hulusi Akar (since 2018), who had rallied to Admiral Yaycı’s ideas, but who did not appreciate the admiral’s popularity and media exposure. In any case, the resignation showed that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wanted to remain the sole master on board, and that his acceptance of their ideas did not mean he was in any way coming under their control. It is still difficult to assess to what extent the opening of bilateral negotiations with Greece in January 2021 are similarly motivated. Despite the absence of concrete progress, the first meetings were followed by rather optimistic comments by the spokesman of the Turkish presidency, İbrahim Kalın, about the possibility of settling all

70. “Ankara salve le respect du plateau continental turc par l’Égypte”, *TRT*, March 20, 2021, available at: www.trt.net.tr.

71. “Muslim Brotherhood Confirms Turkey’s Request from TV Channels to Tone down Criticism of Egypt’s gov’t,” *Duvar English*, March 22, 2021, available at: www.duvarenglish.com.

72. “Mısır ile normalleşme ve Doğu Akdeniz’de şekillenen politika” [Normalization with Egypt and the politics emerging in the Eastern Mediterranean], *Haber7*, March 12, 2021, available at: www.haber7.com.

73. In particular, they expressed this conviction on Youtube channel “Veryansın TV”; their respective interventions are available at: www.youtube.com and www.youtube.com.

territorial disputes.⁷⁴ But *Mavi Vatan* theorists, who appeared reserved about this process, believe that talks should focus only on the Aegean Sea, and that Turkey’s claimed EEZ in the Mediterranean is not negotiable.⁷⁵

An even more serious crisis is a clear reminder that other fundamental geopolitical disagreements over maritime strategy continue to pit the navy’s leaders against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. On April 4, 2021, an open letter signed by 104 retired admirals – including Cem Gürdeniz and Mustafa Özbey – urged the Turkish government not to undermine the Montreux Convention, signed in 1936, and which governs free movement in the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits.⁷⁶ Admiral Gürdeniz went on to criticize strongly the *Kanal İstanbul* project, which envisages the construction of a new sea crossing between the Black Sea and the Marmara Sea, west of Istanbul. This canal project has been promoted by President Erdoğan and would officially reduce ship traffic in the Bosphorus Strait. However, by being beyond the jurisdiction of the Montreux Convention (which applies only to the two Straits mentioned), the canal would facilitate challenges to the Convention. Yet, Cem Gürdeniz believes that “challenging Montreux and getting rid of it is doing a service to imperialism,” concluding that the “*Kanal İstanbul* is the opposite of the Blue Homeland.”⁷⁷ The AKP’s reaction to this warning was swift and brutal: Communications Minister Farhettin Altun accused the signatories of letter of representing a “fifth column,” and of incarnating the “old Turkey,” assimilating their actions to the failed coup of 2016.⁷⁸ For his part, the Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu suggested that these officers were unworthy of their uniforms.⁷⁹ Moreover, the Ankara Public Prosecution Office opened an investigation in the afternoon of publication into “a meeting to commit a crime against state security and constitutional order,” and the next day, Cem Gürdeniz and a dozen other admirals were detained, though they were released on parole on April 13. These very serious tensions indicate that while *Mavi Vatan* may be a geopolitical tool used by Turkey’s president, it does not imply that an overall synergy exists with its designers.

74. A. Garcia, “Fin du 61^e cycle de négociations sur la Méditerranée orientale entre la Grèce et la Turquie”, *Atalayar*, January 26, 2021, available at: <https://atalayar.com>.

75. C. Gürdeniz, *Mavi Vatan’ın Güney cephesi: Doğu Akdeniz*, pp. 163-164.

76. “104 emekli amiralden Montrö ve Atatürk devrimleri bildirisi” [Declaration by 104 admirals on Montreux and Atatürk’s revolutions], *Cumhuriyet*, April 4, 2021.

77. C. Gürdeniz, “Kanal İstanbul Mavi Vata’nın Karşıtıdır” [The *Kanal İstanbul* is the opposite of Blue Homeland], *Cumhuriyet*, April 4, 2021.

78. Viewable on his Twitter account: <https://twitter.com>.

79. “Cumhurbaşkanlığı ve İçişleri’nden 104 amiralin bildirisine tepki” [Reaction by the Presidency and Interior Ministry to the Declaration of 104 Admirals], *Sözcü*, April 4, 2021.

Beyond these internal tensions, the current strategic context is such that the *Mavi Vatan* has practically achieved a consensus within Turkish society (among the major political forces, only the Democratic People’s Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, or HDP), which is pro-Kurdish and marginalized in Parliament, has criticized this doctrine). But it is difficult to predict how power relationships will evolve in the Mediterranean and affect Turkey’s political equilibria. Just as he once supported rapprochement with the EU, and then Ahmet Davutoğlu’s so-called “neo-Ottoman” doctrine, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan could perfectly well change his ideological credentials and recycle other foreign policy doctrines, if this were in his interests. Yet should he leave office, it is far from certain that any successor would renounce the *Mavi Vatan* principles. Far from being linked to a man or a party, the Blue Homeland doctrine exists within a specific strategic context.

Conclusion: Turkey's Strengths and Weaknesses in its Quest for Sea Power

The naval exercise “Mavi Vatan 2021” took place from February 25 to March 7, 2021. It involved 87 ships, 27 aircraft and 20 helicopters, as well as armed (SİHA) and unarmed (İHA) drones, in the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean.⁸⁰ While the navy provided the bulk of these forces, army helicopters, air force fighter aircraft, as well as search and rescue elements of Turkey's gendarmerie were also mobilized.⁸¹ Hoping that these exercises will take place annually, Admiral Cihat Yaycı, who now heads the Maritime and Global Strategies Center at the University of Bahçeşehir, has said that they were very important not only for teaching the various corps mobilized to work together, but also to show Turkey's international partners its ability to carry out major joint maneuvers.⁸² So there is a strong willingness by Ankara to demonstrate the rapid modernization of its fleet and its growing expertise in the naval affairs. This is particularly important in the *Mavi Vatan* ideology, because the navy, supported by ground and, above all, air forces, must be the sword with which Turkey can seriously defend its territorial ambitions.

From the 1990s onwards, Turkey's willingness to develop its naval forces has resulted in a two-stage strategy. Initially, this involved buying readily-available equipment from allied countries to give the fleet consistency: Many American frigates, as well as six A69-type avisos were bought from France, and are now under the Turkish flag.⁸³ Then, under the impetus of admirals, Turkey has been pursuing a nationalization of military production, and has started to develop its own weapons. This ambition is visible through the MİLGEM (*Milli Gemi*, or National Ship) program, which aims at strategic autonomy, and which has been defended especially by Admirals Özdem Örnek and Soner Polat.⁸⁴ After the building four light corvettes (“*Ada*”), commissioned between 2011 and 2019, hunter-class frigates, followed by air defense frigates are planned for 2020s. In addition to MİLGEM, the navy is also set to be

80. “Mavi Vatan tatbikatı nedir? Mavi Vatan tatbikat hakkında bilgiler” [What is Mavi Vatan? Information on this exercise], *Hürriyet*, February 25, 2021.

81. “Mavi Vatan-2021 tatbikatı bugün başlıyor: Gövde gösterisi” [The Mavi Vatan-2021 exercise begins today: Torso doming], *Aydınlık*, February 24, 2021.

82. *Ibid.*

83. J. Henrotin, “Grèce-Turquie : Une confrontation maritime du XXI^e siècle,” *Stratégique*, No. 124, December 2020, pp. 118-119.

84. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-123.

strengthened by the development of a fleet of modern submarines (including six “*Piri Reis*” based on the German T-214, the first of which was commissioned in 2019),⁸⁵ and the acquisition of a helicopter-carrier (the *Anadolu*), which is scheduled for commissioning in 2021.

Nevertheless, the process of modernizing the Turkish Navy still has to overcome many challenges in meeting *Mavi Vatan* ambitions. Lack of technology is still forcing Turkey to use foreign components to produce domestic armaments, creating a dependency effect.⁸⁶ Moreover, Cihat Yaycı’s proposal to re-equip the former French aircraft-carrier *Foch* (sold to Brazil in 2000 under the name *Sao Paulo*, and retrieved by a Turkish consortium in early 2021, officially for dismantling), and to make it a training center for personnel, illustrates the importance accorded by admirals to the acquisition of new equipment more quickly.⁸⁷ Yet the impact of diplomatic crises on the military has also caused Ankara to lose valuable partnerships. By continuing to acquire S-400 missiles from Russia, Turkey is at risk of being excluded from the US F-35 stealth fighter program, even though the *Anadolu* helicopter-carrier was initially meant to accommodate this joint combat aircraft, capable of vertical takeoff.⁸⁸ With no current alternative to replace the F-35s, Ankara is now considering converting the *Anadolu* into a drone-carrier, an alternative that does not seem to match the hopes pinned on this ship.⁸⁹

To become the instrument sought by *Mavi Vatan* theorists, the Turkish armed forces must therefore pursue modernization work which implies maintaining cooperation with Turkey’s traditional partners. To this end, the doctrine cannot cast aside a diplomatic approach in which Ankara maintains a balance between its old alliances and its new ambitions.

85. “Turkey’s First-Generation Submarine Piri Reis hits the Seas”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, December 22, 2019, available at: www.hurriyetdailynews.com.

86. Burak Ege Bekdil, “Turkish Industry Prospers, but Foreign Relations are Limiting its Potential”, *Defense News*, August 17, 2020, available at: www.defensenews.com.

87. “Admiral Cihat Yaycı: Uçak gemisini alım su-33 konuşlandıralım” [Admiral Cihat Yaycı: Let’s take the aircraft carrier and deploy SU-33s], *Aydınlık*, March 24, 2021.

88. J. Henrotin, “Grèce-Turquie : Une confrontation maritime du XXI^e siècle”, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

89. L. Lagneau, “La Turquie parle de transformer le navire TCG Anadolu en porte-drones”, *Opex360*, March 13, 2021, available at: www.opex360.com.



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