

ESCALATION RISKS IN THE AEGEAN SEA

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SINCE 2019, there has been a dramatic deterioration in relations between Turkey and Greece in the form of maritime brinkmanship in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, and a heightened confrontational rhetoric.

At the extreme end of declarations, Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan threatened Greece on several occasions with the lyrics from *I can come suddenly one night*, an old Turkish song which was widely broadcast during the military intervention in Cyprus in 1974. It comes as no surprise that in Greece, where Turkey is traditionally considered to be the number one threat to the country's external security, Turkish statements have become regular headline news. What is more surprising, however, is that Turkey, for whom Greece has always been one among many other neighbouring threats, has chosen lately to turn its attention on Greece as an imminent danger. "Greek bashing" is prominent in the Turkish media and tallies with the overall political and military domestic discourse.

According to the Greek Ministry of Defence, between January and October 2022 a total of 8,880 violations of Greek airspace by Turkish planes and drones were recorded, compared with 2,744 in 2021 and far fewer in previous years. There is little doubt that it would only take one small accident in the air or the sea to spark an actual conflict in the Aegean, and while the idea of an all-out war is still perceived as improbable, a smaller military incident is seen increasingly as a plausible scenario. From a rational choice perspective, a war between Greece and Turkey would have major negative implications for NATO's south-eastern flank and it would draw the United States and Europe into an unnecessary conflict at a time when their attention is needed in Ukraine. It would also have negative fiscal repercussions for both countries, which rely heavily on tourism and foreign direct investment for their economies and at a time when both are facing major economic challenges. Why then, when all sides stand to lose from a direct military confrontation between Turkey and Greece, is a climate of war cultivated? And is the current

escalation another instance of bilateral high intensity in the context of a long historical cycle of ups and downs between the two neighbours, or is it a different geopolitical reality?

Indeed, what first comes to mind when thinking of Greek-Turkish relations is a lingering historical legacy of animosity and competing nationalist narratives that go back to the Ottoman times, starting with the Greek war of liberation. Greece's emergence in the 1820s as an independent nation state and its subsequent territorial expansion came at the expense of the Ottoman rule, while Turkey's founding of the Republic in 1923 came at the expense of Greece's military and civilian presence in Asia Minor, the centenary of which is being commemorated at present by the two sides but for completely opposite reasons. When in need to escalate his rhetoric, Erdoğan often resorts to reminding Greeks of their defeat in Anatolia and the lessons that they should draw from this memory for the present. History weighs heavily in the minds of the two peoples and their respective elites, whose default position is to be

antagonistic towards each other, notwithstanding some short-lived interludes of rapprochement and détente, including the most recent in 1999.

Beyond historical memories, there are some actual disagreements which are deeply entrenched in a zero-sum mentality on both sides, with the division of Cyprus and the Aegean disputes being at the heart of bilateral competition. Both issues are unresolved legacies of the 1970s. Following several failed attempts to achieve a solution to the Cyprus problem, Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots have recently moved away from the decades' old and UN-sanctioned principle of a bizonal, bicomunal federation, in favour of a two-state solution, in complete contradiction with the Greek and Greek Cypriot position. Similarly, the delimitation of Aegean territorial waters has seen no progress, occasionally leading to military escalation and near-confrontation, as happened in 1987, 1996 and 2020, all of which saw conflict averted at the very last moment. Under the UN's Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), every state has the right to establish the breadth of its territorial sea up to a limit not exceeding 12 nautical miles [22km]. Turkey, not a signatory to the UNCLOS, does not agree with the rights of the Aegean islands to the 12 nautical miles distance and has threatened Greece with military action should it exercise its rights under the UNCLOS. Both Greece and Turkey currently claim six nautical miles (11km) of territorial water in the Aegean, and 12 nautical miles off their other shores. A related dispute concerns sovereign rights to exploit undersea hydrocarbons and the right of the Greek islands to an Exclusive Economic Zone.

In November 2019, in response to Greece's backing of the Mediterranean Gas Forum with



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Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Italy and Jordan, Turkey signed a maritime agreement with Libya that cuts a corridor across the Aegean to demarcate new maritime boundaries, with the proposed line in this accord running close to the eastern side of the island of Crete. On October 3, 2022, Ankara signed a follow up preliminary agreement with the Tripoli government to explore for oil and gas off the Libyan coast without specifying whether the surveys would take place in waters south of Greece. In effect, Libya has become an important third actor in the bilateral dispute between Greece and Turkey and relations between the Athens and Tripoli governments have suffered a major blow as a result. Positions at present could not be further apart. Greece accuses Turkey of behaving like a neo-Ottoman revisionist power in the region having adopted an expansionist “blue homeland” agenda – an unofficial geopolitical concept, going back to the aspirations of some peripheral Turkish naval officers

during the 2000s but having gained currency following the failed 2016 coup attempt against Erdoğan – occasionally using maps depicting half of the Aegean belonging to Turkey. Turkey, for its part, accuses Greece of maximalist positions in delimiting maritime boundaries and turning the Aegean into a “Greek lake” and declaring that it is determined to defend its rights as a maritime power in the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece insists that bilateral talks should focus only on the delimitation of the continental shelf, with any unresolved issues going to the International Court in The Hague. Turkey wishes to include territorial waters, ‘grey zones’ in the Aegean, and the demilitarisation of the Eastern Aegean Greek islands, and demands that disputes be handled together in a give-and-take negotiating process.

The overall military balance of power favours Turkey, one of the world's highest military spenders, including the latter's

involvement in several regional expeditions since 2016, where it has demonstrated that it is able to affect political affairs by military interventions on various neighbouring fronts. In response to Turkey's rising military influence, Greece since October 2017 under the then left-wing government of SYRIZA embarked on a closer military cooperation with the United States. The then Prime Minister of Greece, Alexis Tsipras, and the then US President, Donald Trump, made a \$2.4 billion deal to upgrade Greece's F-16 fighters and increase American investment in the country. The pace of these military relations accelerated once the centre-right leader of New Democracy Kyriakos Mitsotakis won the 2019 elections. An upgraded Mutual Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed in October 2021, allowing the US military to operate and train on four military bases, including one in the city port of Alexandroupoli, very near to the Turkish land border. Indeed,

the American vehicle carrier ARC *Endurance* sailed in June 2022 into Alexandroupoli for the “largest transfer of military equipment ever” handled by this northern port, combined with its rising strategic significance in relation also to the war in Ukraine. The US-Greek military partnership has also included in its armament programme the upgrade and expansion of the naval base at Souda Bay in Crete, the aim being to gradually transform this traditionally important port into a permanent base for part of the Hellenic Navy, in order to facilitate faster and more direct access to the Eastern Mediterranean and enjoy the full support of the United States. Washington’s tilt towards Athens and the emphasis on the port of Alexandroupoli has aggravated Turkey’s attitude towards both Greece and the US.

In parallel, Mitsotakis’ government in the autumn of 2021 signed a defence cooperation pact with France which included an order of three French frigates to be delivered from 2025 onwards and an additional 24 Dassault-made Rafale fighter jets – some of them with immediate delivery. The agreement also included a clause for mutual assistance in case of armed attack against either’s territory as well as alignment

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of their foreign and defence policies, with a focus on energy, terrorism, migration, armaments, weapons of mass destruction and maritime security in the Middle East, the Balkans, Africa and the Mediterranean. This agreement involves France as a third party to a potential bilateral conflict between Greece and Turkey and is a further source of annoyance for the latter. From a Greek perspective, such military agreements are also seen as a long overdue modernisation of the country’s armed forces which during the period of the country’s economic crisis had totally stagnated. Greece’s defence expenditure soared from \$5 billion in 2019 to \$8.4 billion in 2021, up from 2.45% of its GDP in 2019 to 3.76% in 2021.

On the other hand, Turkey’s 2017 purchase of Russian S-400 missile defence systems prompted Washington’s immediate reaction and led it to cancel the sale of US F-35 fighter jets and sanction Turkey’s defence industries. The Congress’ opposition to the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey has been a further blow in US-Turkish relations. The Turkish side was particularly annoyed by the official visit of Mitsotakis to the United States on May 2022 when, in his speech to the US Congress, the Greek Prime Minister opposed the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey, which made Erdoğan declare that he would not speak to this Greek Prime Minister any more and would wait for another, “honest” Prime Minister to be elected. In July 2022, the US House of Representatives

approved a legislation prohibiting the sale of the F-16s, unless Turkey could prove the deal was vital for US national security and would not use them for unauthorised overflights over Greece, conditions which Turkish officials refused to accept and declared that they would seek other solutions. The risk for Turkey from this fallout is that, because the bulk of its fighter fleet consists of F-16s in need of significant upgrades, it might put the country’s air force in a disadvantaged position vis a vis Greece. Finally, the recent US decision to lift the arms embargo on the Republic of Cyprus for 2023, to be reviewed on an annual basis after that, was seen as a further act of antagonism by the US on Turkey, given that it lessens the burden on Greece to act as the military guarantor of Cyprus and strengthens Cyprus’ position in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, where the Turks have been conducting oil and gas explorations.

Bilateral competition between Greece and Turkey has spilled over into the field of migration, whereby refugees from Turkey seeking access to Western Europe via Greece are often being used as a way to exert political pressure. Mutual recriminations come and go with Greece criticising Erdoğan for instrumentalising refugees and pushing them to Europe whenever he wants to achieve gains from the EU, and Erdoğan accusing Greece of not respecting human rights for those irregular migrants who come by sea or land. In reality, Turkey is the

world’s largest refugee hosting place – an estimated 3.6 million Syrians, for example, now live there, creating big domestic pressures as well as affecting Erdoğan’s electability amid severe economic problems and in view of elections in mid-2023. Some polls show that Erdoğan’s ratings are boosted whenever he raises the stakes in the Aegean, a foreign policy issue which generates consensus among the different political parties and has the potential to rally the population around it. Erdoğan has proven in the past to be effective in using foreign policy issues, including the Kurdish issue, to achieve the majority that he needs in elections.

It may appear as a paradox that the 20-year period under Erdoğan’s rule has been a tale of two completely different stories. A story of democratisation followed by a story of democratic backsliding; a story of europeanisation followed by de-europeanisation and de-westernisation; a story of zero problems with neighbours followed by a story of problems with many neighbours; a story of Greek Turkish rapprochement followed by Greek Turkish antagonism. Having said that, the Greek Turkish rapprochement may have had some impact when during the years of the



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deep economic crisis in Greece in the first half of the 2010s, with the country in a very vulnerable position, Turkey did not try to benefit militarily from the weakness of the neighbour and relations continued to be functional.

A critical moment which may have signalled the end of rapprochement was the attempted 2016 coup to topple Erdoğan, which made the leader very nervous of former colleagues in power, with Greek Turkish relations being tainted by Erdoğan's fierce pursuit of Gulenists in Europe and the US. Turkey's repeated requests to return eight military officers, accused of being responsible for the coup and who had fled to Greece, were denied by the Greek courts which ruled against extradition on the grounds that their lives would be in danger if they returned to Turkey.

This came as a personal insult to Erdoğan and ignited severe criticism towards the Greek government followed by a spiral of claims and accusations that brought the two countries to the current precarious situation.

Looking to the present, one wonders whether this is yet another occurrence of the post-1970s bilateral pattern that could potentially bring the countries to the brink of war – a threat usually averted by the intervention of the United States – or whether this is a different context of new confrontational geopolitics. I argue that while the past informs the present, the current Greek-Turkish rivalry needs to be contextualised in a radically different global environment which is not reminiscent of any previous historical periods and is markedly different from the recent past. Indeed, the competing relations between the two states are the reflection of the end of the post-cold environment and the rise of global multipolarity. In this new



A history of division: A sign in the Buffer Zone of Nicosia, which is patrolled by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus to prevent a recurrence of violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Picture: UK MOD © Crown copyright 2020

era, Europe's global economic and normative influence is weakening, the US does not have the full monopoly of world hegemony, while China and Russia are challenging the West in multiple ways, with the war in Ukraine being the most serious challenge so far to the West's long-term resilience and unity. In this increasingly realist geopolitical setting, some medium-size powers of the global south are making their presence felt in terms of exercising influence in their regional space, they are distancing themselves from the West and prefer non-alignment in the case of Russia's invasion in Ukraine. In this new world, the threats are not just military in nature but often include the weaponisation of other inter-state fields, including migration, terrorism, (mis) information or energy.

The present Greek-Turkish rivalry contains all of this in the sensitive geographical location of the Eastern Mediterranean, and is marked by sharp asymmetries

in the positioning of the two countries. On the Turkish side, the autocratisation of domestic politics, the autonomisation of geopolitical behaviour and the weakening of the EU and US influences have made the West unsure as to whether Turkey is a friend or foe, and for that reason the former has moved away from a rules-based integration perspective to purely interest based transactional cooperation with Turkey. In the war in Ukraine, Turkey follows a non-aligned policy and a balancing act of strategic ambiguity. On the Greek side, for the first time in its post-WWII history, the country has abandoned its traditional left-wing anti-Americanism and has adopted a fully-fledged strategic commitment to the United States which is supported by the overwhelming majority of political parties from right to left (with the exception of the communist party). In the war in Ukraine, Greece sided unequivocally with the West despite some public reactions

of pro-Russia or pro-peace orientation.

While the traditional policy of the arms race continues unabated by both sides, there are other disputes that are gaining ground in migration, energy or misinformation. Moreover, the involvement of external actors in the Eastern Mediterranean beyond the traditional US presence is injecting other competitive agendas into the mix. The dynamic presence of Russia in the Middle East and its convenient alliance with Turkey, even when their aims do not necessarily coincide in Syria or Libya, complicates the terms of the regional status quo. While Russia has not taken sides so far in the Greek-Turkish bilateral rivalry, it clearly benefits from escalation and conflict in the south eastern flank of NATO. China, the other major external player, sees the Eastern Mediterranean as part of its maritime Belt and Road Initiative and is torn between its own anti-westernism and its long-term economic interests that require stability in the region.

In this context, it is difficult to keep the rivalry strictly bilateral with many more states being potentially drawn – intentionally or unintentionally – into play. Greece consistently builds anti-Turkish alliances, using its EU membership, its upgraded military partnership with France and the US and its relations with Middle Eastern countries. Turkey employs a sharp rhetoric, the threat of its military force and bases the legitimacy of its claims to its large population, its long Mediterranean coastline, its imperial past and its bilateral maritime agreement with Libya. In sum, the altered regional geopolitical environment means more actors are involved and the new issues affecting inter-state relations define the contours of the current Greek Turkish bilateral relations, leading them to unpredictable and risky pathways.