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Greece and Turkey: A Prime Example of a Complicated Relationship

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Introduction

The relations between Greece and Turkey are known to be historically tense and problematic. Despite being NATO allies, their relationship has been marked by various crises over the past decades and often caught the attention of the international community. Greece, on the one side, prides itself on being the origin of Western civilization and democracy, and being able to withstand 400 years of Ottoman reign. Turkey, on the other side, saw its democracy being fractured by periods of instability and

intermittent military coups (1960, 1971, 1980), while as early as 1964, it became an associate member of the European Community; the goal being to ultimately join the 'club' – as Greece did back in 1981.

With historically low trust between the two neighbors, nowadays their relationship has become even more volatile due to geopolitics. For almost 20 years, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have dominated Turkey's political scene. Merely a decade ago,

the country was considered a modern Muslim state and Ankara's objective was to improve relations with all its neighbors – including Greece (the so-called “zero problems” doctrine). However, during the Arab Spring uprisings the situation slowly began to change. These days, Turkey is pursuing an expansion of its sphere of influence by rejecting the regional *status quo*. This significant change in the country's foreign policy can be traced back to the following: after the moderate solidarity shown with regards to the 2016 failed coup attempt, Ankara came to the conclusion that it can no longer trust its Western partners. It also perceives the West to be in (geopolitical) decline, mostly due to the power vacuum created by the United States (US) during the Trump presidency. Therefore, Turkey's assertive posturing in the international arena is increasingly at odds with its Western allies. Among others, this shift can be seen in the country's involvement in the gas dispute with Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as in its increasingly troubled relationship with NATO. The aim of this paper is to provide a brief but comprehensive overview of Greek-Turkish relations by highlighting also the current state of affairs.

Where to start?

There are many issues that divide Greece and Turkey, the most crucial one surely being

Cyprus – back in 1974, the two neighbours were on the cusp of war over the island. In 1960, the latter stopped being a British colony and, based on postcolonial treaties, Greece, Turkey, and the United Kingdom became the guarantors of the newly established Republic. However, a coup against Archbishop Makarios, president of Cyprus since 1960, was orchestrated by the military junta in Athens who wanted unification with Greece (also known as *enosis*). Ankara quickly reacted by invading the island and illegally occupying over 36% of the northern territory of the Republic of Cyprus. In accordance with Turkey's stated goal of national segregation on the island, in 1983, the occupying regime declared the so-called “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus”, an act which was condemned by the international community as legally invalid. Ever since - more than four decades later - and despite various attempts by the international community to solve this issue, the situation remains unchanged (meanwhile, it is also known as the “graveyard of diplomats”).

As long as the “Cyprus issue” remains unresolved, the membership perspective for Turkey looks grim.

Although Turkey's relations with the European Union (EU) date back to the early 1960s, the country has been struggling to gain EU

membership since the accession talks began in 2005. For a rather short period of time, things looked promising. However, as long as the “Cyprus issue”, which is of fundamental political interest for Athens, remains unresolved, the membership perspective for Turkey looks grim. Thus, among other things, the country finds itself obliged to modify its stance on this issue if it truly wants to become part of the EU and contribute to the long-term stability of the region.

Various other factors divide the two neighbors as well: the closure of the Theological Seminary of Halki by Turkey, the country’s denial of the Pontic Greek genocide, and, more recently, the transformation of the church of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Additionally, the disputes in the Aegean are ranging from the delineation of territorial waters to airspace and the continental shelf. For example, the Imia/Kardak crisis in 1996, which brought the question of the sovereignty of the Aegean islands and islets to the surface again, once more pushed the two countries to the brink of war. The Imia are small, uninhabited rocks in the Aegean Sea (part of the Dodecanese), and the confrontation started after a Greek television report stated that a Turkish ship had run aground near the islet and refused help from the Greek coast guard, claiming it was on Turkish territory. Turkish journalists further inflamed the situation by taking down a Greek flag on the islet (which was put there by the Greeks shortly after the incident) and

putting up the Turkish flag instead. Things quickly began to escalate. Greek and Turkish ships surrounded the islets, which are located approximately 19km from Greek territory and 7km from the Turkish coast, and Athens placed soldiers on one of the two rock clusters that make up the islet, while Ankara sent troops to the other. An armed conflict was avoided at the very last minute, after the US intervened and put pressure on both countries. Merely a few years later, in 1999, a new crisis occurred when Turkey accused Greece of offering shelter to the founder and leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, in the Greek embassy in Nairobi. Finally, more recently, the opening of Turkey’s borders to the EU in February 2020, causing a new influx of migrants trying to cross into neighboring Greece, led to additional tensions between the two.

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Nonetheless, there are also positive aspects to be mentioned: A significant rapprochement between the two countries took place after a disastrous earthquake in Turkey’s Marmara region during the summer of 1999, which left thousands of people dead or injured. Greece immediately offered support by flying in food,

tents, blankets, and medical supplies. Just a few weeks later, the region around Athens was hit by an equally devastating earthquake and Ankara promptly reciprocated the aid. All this clearly showed that in times of need, both countries are willing to put aside their long-standing differences and show solidarity towards their neighbor. Relations improved even further after the Helsinki Summit (December 1999), where Turkey received the EU candidacy status. From then onwards, explanatory talks were held between Turkey and Greece in order to find common ground for negotiating on the various disputes.

The gas dispute – tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean

Unsurprisingly, tensions between Athens and Ankara ran high once again with the latter surveying for potential energy reserves in the area Greece claims to be part of its continental shelf. The EastMed Gas Forum (EMGF), established in 2020 by Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Egypt, Israel, and Jordan in order to create a regional gas market, and Turkey's exclusion from the negotiations, as well as the maritime deal between Turkey and the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya, further inflamed the situation in the Mediterranean. After a brief easing of tensions, where both countries expressed their readiness to take up talks under the NATO umbrella, the dispute

intensified again. In autumn 2020, Turkey continued with its assertive approach to defend the country's maritime interests. It announced that the survey vessel Oruç Reis would resume operations near the Greek island of Kastellorizo, which is located merely 2km from the Turkish mainland. Eventually, both countries have been conducting military drills and sending their war ships to the region, and the Mediterranean swiftly became a multi-stage theatre for demonstrating military might.

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The gas dispute also confronted the EU with a particularly difficult mediator role. Even though – at least in theory - Greece has the backing of the Union, Brussels has refrained from firm action against Ankara, imposing only limited sanctions targeting mostly individuals or companies responsible for drilling in contested waters. The main reason behind this are concerns that President Erdoğan would retaliate either by reinforcing the country's ties with Russia or by encouraging more migrants to pass through to Europe. In spite of everything, Turkey is crucial to EU interests and especially the continued Turkish adherence to the migration deal of 2016 remains of paramount importance.

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Without a doubt, the crisis in the Mediterranean will continue to pose a pressing issue. With energy taking up the largest share in the country's overall imports, Turkey has a vital interest in securing its share in a growing contest over this region. Furthermore, despite the fact that the dispute between Greece and Turkey over Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) is a long-standing one, the mounting tensions during 2020 showed that a military collision, even between decades-long NATO allies, is a realistic possibility. In case of a renewed escalation, a deadlock situation could arise, which would have a negative impact on EU-NATO relations, as well as on Turkey's bilateral relations with individual states.

The Franco-German axis - EU's big two taking sides?

It is a fact that the diverging interests of the EU27 vis-à-vis Turkey are preventing the Union from adopting a solid approach towards Ankara. Therefore, the current Greek government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis has invested more in bilateral partnerships in order to compensate

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Under President Macron, *France*, one of Greece's closest allies, is pushing for European strategic autonomy in the field of security and defense, and staunchly supporting Athens in the Mediterranean gas dispute; France's joint military training exercises with Greece, Italy, and Cyprus as well as the agreement to sell 18 Rafale fighter aircraft to Athens are a case in point. The French government also called on its European partners to create a so-called *Pax Mediterranea* in order to better protect European energy interests. The country has been openly critical of Turkey's policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and even sent the Charles de Gaulle nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to patrol the contested waters. Ankara's current actions run counter to France's geopolitical aspirations in various contexts; among other things, Paris is concerned that President Erdoğan's reinsertion of Islam into politics could spread into North Africa and encourage Islamist militias, consequently damaging the French sphere of influence. Therefore, France mainly acts as a 'defender' of the current regional order while Turkey assumes the role of a 'challenger'. Apart from Greece, France, and other EU member states, like

Austria, resolutely call for heavy sanctions and are in favor of officially terminating Turkey's EU accession process.

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In contrast to France, *Germany* does not clearly take Greece's side in the gas dispute. Being the home of Europe's largest Turkish diaspora, the country favors a dialogue-based approach – as do also other EU members like Italy or Spain. Although Berlin is equally unhappy with Turkey's destabilizing foreign policy, it follows a more cautious line of action and has shown willingness to take on the role of an honest broker by mediating between Athens and Ankara. However, due to Germany's comprehensive economic and political relations with Turkey and its traditionally problematic relations with Greece, Berlin's credibility as a 'neutral' mediator is questionable.

Greek-Turkish cooperation within NATO

Greece and Turkey are among NATO's oldest member states. Both joined the Alliance in 1952, based on the assumption that their membership would eventually help pacify

their behavior toward each other. However, NATO found itself with two members that are officially allies, but whose mutual suspicion and animosity never really subsided. Turkey is the most important troop contributor to missions and operations next to the US and, due to its special geographic location, of considerable strategic importance to the Alliance. Although NATO would undoubtedly be weaker without it, Turkey is increasingly turning into a source of insecurity. Currently, the country's relations with the Alliance are at an all-time low, among others due to the 2017 purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system.

Being located in the southern region of the Alliance, a strategically very important region, Greece has gained a security dividend. Especially its key value in maritime security has been regularly confirmed. However, regarding the various disagreements between Ankara and Athens, the latter does not fully trust NATO leadership to mediate fairly. Back in the 1970s, when the two neighbors were on the verge of war over Cyprus, it was not NATO as such which prevented hostilities but the involvement of the US, its most powerful member. It is indeed becoming increasingly difficult for the Alliance to broker between two members without clearly taking sides. The new US President, Joe Biden, infuriated Ankara back in April by declaring that the killings and deportations of

Armenians in 1915 was actually genocide. As a result, Greece got its hopes up that the same might happen also in the case of the Pontic Greeks.

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In spite of everything, so far NATO's day-to-day business (e.g. consultations, exercises, and operations) seems to be proceeding normally. Nonetheless, a possible escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean would have detrimental effects on the cohesion and credibility of NATO. One should also keep in mind that a fully functioning transatlantic Alliance – which Turkey is an integral part of - is of paramount importance for the EU as a whole; at least for the foreseeable future, NATO will continue to represent the main framework for European security.

Conclusion

Greece often sees itself as isolated and detached from the rest of the EU. There is widespread disappointment because most European governments are unwilling to confront President Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman ambitions and assertive

strategy in the region. Ankara's actions can be interpreted as an attempt to establish Turkey as a major regional power with an autonomous foreign policy, but at the same time they also expose the country's increasing international isolation. Additionally, a more assertive foreign policy also deflects (domestic) attention from the country's deteriorating economy. Seeking foreign investments for Turkey, which has been troubled by a currency crisis and an economic downturn made even worse by the Covid-19 pandemic, President Erdoğan has recently toned down his anti-Western rhetoric.

A common European line regarding Turkey seems unlikely, at least for the foreseeable future. Events like the gas dispute in the Mediterranean or the resurgence of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have shown us once more how vulnerable peace and stability really are. It is of vital importance that the EU pursues a careful balancing act between firmly confronting Turkey's unilateralism but at the same time preventing bilateral tensions from influencing effective policymaking at the EU level. To calm down tensions and improve prospects for fruitful talks and negotiations, both Ankara and Athens should respect each other's red lines and refrain from provocative rhetoric and action. Another crucial aspect, which would significantly improve the overall situation, would be to advance UN-mediated

talks about a (political) resolution on Cyprus. Although the possibility of a mutually satisfactory agreement regarding the status of the long-divided island remains very slim, without it, relations between the two neighbors are likely to remain tense.

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