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The Greek-Turkish Maritime Dispute

Resisting the Future

 Springer

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To my sister-mother Litsa

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Introduction

As widely known, over history Greece and Turkey have shared an abiding distrust and enmity. Since the foundation of the modern Greek state in the nineteenth century, Greece and what would later become modern Turkey have been rivals, outright enemies and often at war. Deeply ingrained resentments and popular stereotypes, refuelled by over-sensationalised and nationalistically motivated news coverage, still serve as the lenses through which the two peoples perceive and interpret each other's behaviour.

The perception of threat from Turkey has traditionally dominated Greek thinking about the strategic environment, including defence planning. It has also absorbed enormous energy and resources on the Greek side. In broader political terms, a conflict with Ottoman and modern Turkey has been central to the development of Greek nationalism and the evolution of the modern state (Lesser et al. 2001, 20–24).

From Greece's independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1830 until World War I, Greeks and Turks witnessed intermittent periods of savage war and precarious peace with each other. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1919 was succeeded by yet another Greco-Turkish War in 1920, this time between the Greek Kingdom and the National Turkish Movement led by Kemal Atatürk, which was terminated in 1923 with the Treaty of Lausanne. Mutual NATO membership and shared Cold War fears of Soviet Russia did not stop the two from almost going to war after the outbreak of the Cypriot independence struggle and the Turkish pogrom against the Greek living population in Istanbul in 1955, after the intercommunal riots in Cyprus in 1963–1964 and after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974.

In 1974, armies of the two countries clashed again for short time in the context of the Cyprus problem. The formation of the Aegean dispute in the 1970s and 1980s further aggravated the already precarious coexistence, creating an enduring and intractable dispute over the Aegean Sea souring the Greek–Turkish relationship more than any other issue. This dispute has traditionally taken the form of a frozen conflict, with occasional flare-ups until today in whose context the two countries came several times close to a war, in 1976, 1987, 1996 and 2020, to name a few.

Since the crisis in the Aegean of March 1987, the Greek political system has been overwhelmingly in agreement that holding discussions with Turkey on the maritime dispute is imperative. Talks could, under certain conditions, lead to negotiations. However, Greece would enter talks on the condition that the only issue to be negotiated is continental shelf and Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ) delineation in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Turkey, on the other hand, would enter into serious negotiations only in order to discuss a wide range of issues which Turkey has been raising since 1973. These include Ankara's claims on the continental shelf, the demilitarisation of the eastern Aegean islands, the territorial waters and the authority on the Flight Information Region over the Aegean Sea. Moreover, since the mid-1990s Turkey has begun questioning the legal architecture in the Aegean Sea established by the Lausanne Treaty, disputing Greece's sovereignty over a number of islets, most notably the islets of Imia/Kardak by claiming that the "undetermined" legal status of these isles *de facto* forms "grey zones" in the Aegean Sea. In recent years, almost all Turkey's political parties and dignitaries have challenged Greece's sovereignty over east Aegean and Dodecanese islands from Samothraki to Kastellorizo, alleging that their demilitarisation were a condition to Greece's territorial sovereignty over them. They also have claimed that, by militarising them, Greece has been threatening the territorial regimes agreed in Lausanne and Paris Peace Treaty thereby posing a threat to international security. Of secondary importance but still on the agenda is also the issue of the exploitation of possible energy resources in the Aegean. Greece has always perceived the dispute as a cardinal security problem, whereas in previous decades Turkey saw it rather as a struggle over resources and less a security problem (Axt et al. 2008, 175).

Greece's and Turkey's membership in the NATO alliance since 1952 has not calmed these concerns for either country. NATO persistently and deliberately¹ has been avoiding to get involved in the Greek–Turkish conflict. Therefore, since 1973–1974 Greece and Turkey have been only formally NATO allies, while it appears that the Greek and Turkish forces were never properly integrated into the overall NATO military command structure. There was ample evidence that they merely seem to function as national forces rather than as allied ones. Even in the 1950s there was a fear of strategic nature circulating among the highest NATO operational and component levels of command. It was estimated that in case of war in the Balkans a Soviet Bloc offensive operation could cut easily the NATO forces off, forcing them to fight different battles in separate sub-theatres because no contact between Greek and Turkish land forces would be maintained. Notably, in the wake of the Cyprus crisis in August 1974, Athens decided to withdraw unilaterally from NATO's integrated military structure as a protest "against the Alliance's inactivity" during the Turkish invasion in Cyprus. Almost simultaneously the United States imposed embargo on arms sales to Turkey. Greece stopped taking part in, among

¹ It is characteristic that NATO does even support applications for studies or research programmes on such a topics.

others, the NATO Defence Planning Committee, in joint military drills and sharing information with its allies on the common air defence until its re-integration in 1980. This inherited problem of the NATO integrated military command could never be erased outright. To the contrary, whenever, from 1955 onwards, a crisis in the Greek–Turkish relations occurred, an unwholesome gap between the two countries and their NATO allies was manifested in full display. These crises quickly escalated into serious disputes threatening to disrupt, first, Turkey’s ability to control the only sea connection between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, with its possession of the Dardanelles, and second, the whole NATO’s defence capability in the region (Stergiou 2021, 28).

The fact that Greece and Turkey are blessed or cursed to be situated in the Eastern Mediterranean, a geopolitically highly combustible region haunted by numerous ethnic and political conflicts, is an important component of the analysis. Notably, the East Med region has been in geopolitical, geoeconomic and geostrategic terms important throughout history. It is a common area for three different continents – Europe, Asia and Africa – and the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Additionally, there are two very important sea straits in its Eastern basin: the first one is the Dardanelles, through which the Aegean Sea communicates with the Black Sea and the various countries whose coastlines are located in its wider region. The shores of the Aegean constitute a crucial part of this complex. They have been interwoven through a long, shared history and have laid at the centre of the Turkish–Greek encounter in contradictory ways. They have been places of peaceful cohabitation between Orthodox Christians and Muslims, Greeks and Turks but also sites of ethnic antagonism, conflict and disputes (Karakatsanis 2014, 81–82).

The Mediterranean Sea is among the world’s busiest waterways. It is estimated that about 15% of global shipping activity by number of calls and 10% by vessel are noted in the wider region per year in the last decade. In the same decade, 13,000 merchant ships made 252,000 calls at Mediterranean ports, totalling 3.8 billion deadweight tons on average per year. Merchant vessels operating within and through the Mediterranean are getting larger and carrying more trade in larger parcels (Chrysochou and Dalaklis 2019, 142).

The 2009–2015 discoveries of gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean raised expectation about an even greater natural energy endowment that has, temporarily, doubled that political, economic and geopolitical importance of the region and compounded pre-existing conflicts and rivalries morphing an intractable polyhedron. For Turkey, the Aegean Sea is a common maritime area between the two riparian states. For Greece, the Aegean Sea is part of the Greek homeland and therefore any concession against this established perception would be considered national treason. The absence of a commonly accepted legal regime for maritime borders has exacerbated the existing differences. Pending maritime delimitation issues with regard to the delimitation of the continental shelf and the EEZs between the adjacent states turned out to be a source of ongoing tensions, having, however, not created serious problems to the freedom of navigation and consequently to the maritime transport and the respective energy supply routes. The delimitation of maritime

zones is an extremely difficult and contentious political issue because it addresses sovereign rights and economic interests at the same time. Against this background, the licensing search rounds for hydrocarbons or drilling and exploitation of natural gas and oil deposits by some states ignited serious interstate conflicts or rivalries that brought the neighbouring countries to the verge of a war, although energy in itself has not been in most of the cases the main cause of the problems.

Things got complicated in the Eastern Mediterranean when, in November 2019, Turkey signed a maritime delimitation agreement with the Tripoli-based internationally recognised government as Turkey found itself boxed into a small area of the Eastern Mediterranean, with Egypt, Cyprus and Greece able to expand their maritime interests and boosting their alliance. Greece's response with the signing of delimitation agreement of its maritime zone with Egypt and Italy in summer 2020 prompted Ankara's heavy reaction, resulting in serious tensions in the Aegean Sea. Greece and Turkey waxed for several weeks locked in a stiff standoff the region had not witnessed in 20 years. Since a possible confrontation could destabilise NATO's southeast flank for good with a considerable risk to spiral into a multinational conflict, great uncertainty prevailed once again in the European Union and the United States. The tension blew off steam by the end of 2020 following up by exploratory talks in 2021 again after a 5-year hiatus marked by grievances over their rival claims to Mediterranean waters to backslide again in 2022 into a state of emergency putting a quick end to some modules of communication and cooperation on law politics issues that were established in 2021.

At the same time, Mediterranean has become the hotspot of climate change that is expected to unfold more rapidly in this region than anywhere else (United Nations 2021). Therefore, regardless of the various legal and geopolitical obstacles that have hindered development of the region's reserves, serious environmental concerns about the impact of the extraction of the hydrocarbons on the regional ecosystem have come in recent years into occurrence. On the occasion of unparalleled wildfires by which Greece and Turkey were inflicted in summer 2021, it became obvious that both countries are faced equally with a survival challenge posed by the ongoing climate crisis. While frictions among the two countries about maritime zones and continental shelf delimitation related to sovereign claims and to some degree with ambitions of finding oil and gas have abounded in recent years nearly provoking large-scale conflicts, the impact of a climate crisis on Turkey and Greece has been extreme. The Mediterranean's more than half-a-billion inhabitants seem to face highly interconnected climate risks. Moreover, the two countries are expected to face mass migration floods as a result of severe weather phenomena in these parts of the planet. Although the so-called "keep hydrocarbons in the ground" approach appeared to tentatively gain ground, especially in Greece, the high energy prices and the threatening disruption in energy supply caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022 revived interest in hydrocarbons threatening to reverse this trend and of course to rekindle geopolitical tensions.

Subsequently, the book seeks to shed light on the background of these developments. Utilising a multidisciplinary methodology, combining theoretical, legal, geopolitical and historical analysis, the study intends to clarify the various points of

frictions in the Greek–Turkish maritime dispute. Moreover, using, for the very first time, a comparative assessment of hydrocarbons research and exploitation activities’ socio-economic and environmental impact as well as climate change prognosis for the region, the study comes up with some ideas about an alternative paradigm of economic development that, in turn, might be useful at settling the intractable and multilayered Greek–Turkish maritime dispute.

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Abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
EEZ	Economic Exclusive Zone
EU	European Union
FIR	Flight Information Region
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ITLOS	International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in Hamburg
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PASOK	Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Greece)
SAR	Search and Rescue Area
UNCLOS	United Nations Law of the Sea Convention

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