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## **Turkey's 'Precious Loneliness' vs. Greece's Multilateralism**

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In his recent May 17, landmark anti-Turkey speech at the US Congress Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis called upon the members of the House not to provide F-16s to Turkey due to its border violations and to adopt a harsher stance on Cyprus. Since then, the Turkish-Greek bilateral relations have deteriorated. Certainly, the vigorous response of the members of Congress that was characterized by applauding the Greek prime minister 37 times in 42 minutes deepened Ankara's concerns regarding the balance of power between Turkey and Greece in the long run.<sup>1</sup>

Given the importance of the venue of the speech - in the shadow of the December 2020 US CAATSA sanctions against Turkish defense industries - Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan chose not to remain silent and responded harshly when he cancelled the bilateral high-level strategic council agreement with Greece.<sup>2</sup> Erdoğan also closed diplomatic channels with the Greek premier and accused him of betraying the good nature of their personal relations.<sup>3</sup>

Today, apart from their historic rivalry, Turkey and Greece suffer from chronic disagreements, such as the maritime sovereignty problems in the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea, the status of Hagia Sophia, minorities, and the Cyprus dispute. In addition to these well-known problems, Turkey has requested the extradition of the Fethullah Gülen Movement-affiliated coup perpetrators – who are labelled by Turkey as terrorists – from Greece. In addition, there has been an influx of refugees from Turkey to Greece. These new obstacles have emerged challenging bilateral relations. Thus, while seeking to solve these problems through dialogue, simultaneously, both Ankara and Athens are seeking to deter each other by engaging in an arms race.

Despite being members of the NATO alliance since 1952, having fought the wars of independence against each other in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and given their indirect confrontation in the 1974 Cyprus War, both Ankara and Athens continue to see themselves as potential national security threats.

Despite this tension, the war in Ukraine was seen as a significant opportunity to thaw relations. Indeed, last March's Erdogan-Mitsotakis summit in Istanbul went beyond expectations. Both leaders' statements regarding their responsibility for Europe's energy security was perceived as the first concrete step for building a potential energy partnership that could decrease the EU's dependency on Russia for fossil fuels.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the enthusiasm of the moment was expressed through a projected increase of the bilateral trade volume from 5.3 billion dollars<sup>5</sup> to 10 billion dollars.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of this, the momentum could not be preserved due to chronic disagreements on the maritime borders in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.

For instance, due to the proximity of the Greek islands to the Turkish mainland, Ankara did not become a party to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that, in general, recognized islands' rights to declare their own continental shelf and territorial waters. Indeed, the Turkish recognition of UNCLOS could drastically shrink Ankara's sovereignty both in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean in favor of Athens. Therefore, as a state policy, Turkey opposes Greece's UNCLOS-based territorial water claims.



Photo: [Wikimedia](#) / Cihat Yaycı

In order to cope with this challenge, in 2019 Turkey officially adopted the "Blue Homeland" (Mavi Vatan) Doctrine which was first propounded by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz and later further developed by resigned Admiral Cihat Yaycı. Accordingly, Turkey rejects the status-quo that was established by The Treaty of Lausanne (1923), replacing it with new maritime borders which drew the median line between the Turkish and the Greek mainlands, following the principles of "equidistance with other riparian states."<sup>7</sup> By viewing the maritime

dispute this way, Turkey would in fact turn a number of Greek islands into enclaves within Turkish territorial waters. The doctrine not only minimized Greek maritime sovereignty claims, it also cut through the geographical maritime contiguity between Greece and the Republic of Cyprus.

In addition to this declaration, the Turkish navy and air forces conduct routine "demonstration of power" missions to underline their presence on the ground and the disputed nature of the maritime zones, while aiming to prevent Greece from moving to create its own facts on the ground.

Unsurprisingly, from the Greek point of view these missions and the "Blue Homeland" doctrine itself are considered to be explicit violations of Greek sovereignty over its islands. In addition, in the shadow of the 1974 Cyprus War – where the northern portion of the island was occupied by the Turkish Armed Forces – the perception of a potential Turkish offensive on the Greek islands is considered to be a tangible national security threat for Athens. This is true in particular following the signing of the maritime delimitation agreement between Turkey and Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) in 2019. That agreement undermined Greek and Cypriot territorial water claims and their exclusive economic zones (EEZ). From

the Greek perspective, the threat against the islands became even more evident. Greek suspicions cannot be dismissed as mere paranoia when the Turkish Armed Forces' annual "Blue Homeland" military drills include exercises where Turkish commandos rehearse "taking control of an enemy island."<sup>8</sup>



Potential Turkish continental shelf/EEZ in the eastern Mediterranean Sea according to the equitable principles proposed by Turkey – Source: Used with permission from Prio Cyprus Centre (2013)

Along with the other Greek islands, Kastellorizo's strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean constitutes the most important disagreement between Turkey and Greece. Thanks to this tiny island's existence, Greece can claim that its territorial waters extend nearly to the Turkish mainland. On the other hand, Turkey claims territorial waters based on its 1,577 km-long shore in the Eastern Mediterranean – the longest in the region. Due to Greek security concerns regarding Kastellorizo, which sits only 1.5 km

away from the Turkish shores and 600 km away from Greece's mainland, Greece deployed its soldiers to the island. It was supposed to remain de-militarized according to the basic interpretation of Article 14 of the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty. Seeing this deployment as a hostile act, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar decided to escalate the situation even further in December 2021 when he implied that the Turkish soldiers are capable of conducting an amphibious attack against Kastellorizo.<sup>9</sup> This only served to justify Athens' controversial decision. Recently, on June 7, Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu questioned Greece's sovereignty over the militarized islands of the Aegean Sea and Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>10</sup>

While the current diplomatic crisis stems from the maritime territorial claims and the violations of the air space, in fact in 2020, Turkey also challenged Greece's sovereignty at the İpsala-Kipi border crossing by allowing Syrian, Afghan and Pakistani refugees to cross the border to Greece without an inspection. The Greek border guards thwarted this attempt and Turkey had to withdraw refugees from the border and send them back to repatriation centers due to the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unsurprisingly, the clash with the unarmed refugees along the border had pushed Athens to make necessary preparations for a repeat of this scenario. Athens decided to expand its 40 km-long border fence to 120 km.<sup>11</sup>

Such attempts of border violations provide the Greek government with necessary excuses to knock on the door of the EU by stating that Athens is protecting the EU's borders. Greece has consistently employed the strategy of involving the EU in Greek-Turkish tension. This game plan was mainly adopted by the Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias and his New Democracy Party. In addition to labeling Turkey as a country which acts against international law in an arbitrary manner, Athens uses this strategy to form an international coalition against Ankara. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's latest statements on June 1 calling for restraint and urging Turkey not to violate the Greek airspace and respect EU's territorial integrity can be seen as a remarkable consequence of this policy. Turkey has found it difficult to maintain and explain its position outside the framework of the UNCLOS. Despite this difficult

position, Ankara blasts critics of the equidistance principle (*Hakkaniyet*), by stating that these states are falling into the trap of the Greek government.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to diplomatic condemnations, Ankara also chose to show off its muscles to Athens by launching the "Efes 2022" (Ephesus) military drill together with Greece's adversaries, Libya, North Macedonia, Albania and Azerbaijan. This military drill was seen in Greece as Turkish preparation for launching an invasion of Greek islands.<sup>13</sup> The situation escalated even further.

As the anxiety from a potential Turkish invasion grows in Athens, the Hellenic Republic has deepened its attachment to the US. Certainly, Turkey's gradual detachment from the US and its incompatible foreign policy stance contributed to this rapprochement. Greece allowed the US to inaugurate new military bases on its territories, enabling it to replace Turkey's strategic importance. The inauguration of the military bases in 2019, following the American-Greek mutual defense cooperation agreement, combined with the deployment of American troops to the border town of Alexandroupoli was not well received in Ankara.<sup>14</sup> Many Turks began to ask anxiously whether the US troops were deployed to Greece to contain Russia or if they really deployed against Turkey. In this atmosphere, Turkish foreign minister Çavuşoğlu recently slammed his American counterpart Antony Blinken for "the loss of US' balance" in favor of Greece.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, the apparent US Congressional support for Mitsotakis and Scholz's recent statements has proved the efficacy of Athens' multilateral strategy vis-à-vis Turkey's 'Precious Loneliness'. Conceptualized by President Erdoğan's spokesperson İbrahim Kalın, the Precious Loneliness foreign policy doctrine requires Turkey to adjust its foreign policy in accordance with its Islamic-moral values - at the expense of Ankara's immediate interests - which inevitably led to downgrading its relations with "immoral states".

Certainly, Turkey's independent foreign policy doctrine, which jeopardized American and Western interests when it conducted a rapprochement with Russia, China and even with Iran on Tehran's nuclear program, may have pushed the US and the EU to "lose their balance" in favor of Greece. Greece may take this newfound support as a basis to refuse to back down from its maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea.

From the Turkish perspective, this abrasive stance is considered as an attempt to strangle Turkey in the seas. That is why, Ankara, which is not capable of achieving what it wants at the negotiating table seeks to send signals to Athens by using its military power on the ground. This demonstration of power is acknowledged on the other side as a threat to invade Greek islands, which is what led to the militarization of the islands in the proximity of the Turkish mainland in the first place. Undoubtedly, the Greek military deployment to the islands next to the Turkish coast ring alarm bells in Ankara, viewing this act as a clear violation of the Lausanne Treaty and the Paris Agreement, which has regulated the regime of the Greek islands until recently.

In short, both Athens and Ankara are suffering from this vicious cycle which will not favor either side on a national level. In the meantime, Greece's diplomatic superiority

based on its multilateralist strategy has produced better results than Ankara's 'Precious Loneliness'. This latest saga in the Eastern Mediterranean leads us to the conclusion that Turkey should mend its fences with the West to preserve its immediate national interests. It is obvious that adopting a pro-Western foreign policy does not increase the public approval at home; however, it is indeed necessary for preserving the national security of the Turkish Republic. Until that crucial step is taken, it seems that President Erdoğan will be crowned as the big winner of this friction, since elevated tension, especially with Turkey's historical rival Greece, can distract the Turkish people from their daily troubles.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Mitsotakis: Türkiye ile görüşmeye hazırız," *DW*, May 25, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/tr/yunanistan-ba%C5%9Fbakan%C4%B1-mitsotakis-t%C3%BCrkiye-ile-g%C3%B6r%C5%9Fmeye-haz%C4%B1r%C4%B1z/a-61932105> [June 7, 2022]

<sup>2</sup> "Erdoğan: Yunanistan ile Yüksek Düzeyli Stratejik Konsey anlaşmamızı bozduk," *Euronews*, June 1, 2022, <https://tr.euronews.com/2022/06/01/erdogan-yunanistan-ile-yukse-ducey-ly-stratejik-konsej-anlasmam-z-bozduk> [June 7, 2022]

<sup>3</sup> "Erdoğan: Benim için artık Miçotakis diye biri yok," *DW*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/tr/erdo%C4%9Fan-benim-i%C3%A7in-art%C4%B1k-mi%C3%A7otakis-diye-biri-yok/a-61907620> [June 6, 2022]

<sup>4</sup> "Türkiye-Yunanistan gerginliğinde yeni safha," *DW*, June 3, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/tr/t%C3%BCrkiye-yunanistan-gerginli%C4%9Finde-yeni-safha/a-62029949> [June 6, 2022]

<sup>5</sup> "İş dünyası, Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın Yunanistan Başbakanı Miçotakis ile görüşmesine odaklandı," *AA*, March 12, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ekonomi/is-dunyasi-cumhurbaskani-erdoganin-yunanistan-basbakani-micotakis-ile-gorusmesine-odaklandi/2532698> [June 7, 2022]

<sup>6</sup> "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Yunanistan Başbakanı Miçotakis'le görüştü," *NTV*, March 13, 2022, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-yunanistan-basbakani-micotakisle-gorustu.QEejEfl9WUiFyTtBEzo4Lw> [June 7, 2022]

<sup>7</sup> Aurélien Denizeau, "Mavi Vatan, the 'Blue Homeland': The Origins, Influences and Limits of an Ambitious Doctrine for Turkey," *Ifri*, April 2021, p. 10, [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/denizeau\\_mavi\\_vatan\\_turkey\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/denizeau_mavi_vatan_turkey_2021.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> "Temsili düşman adası ele geçirildi, yerli silahlar göz doldurdu Mavi Vatan-2019'da görev tamam," *Habertürk*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.haberturk.com/izmir-haberleri/67341022-temsili-dusman-adası-ele-gecirildi-yerli-silahlar-goz-doldurdumavi-vatan-2019da-gorev-tamam> [June 9, 2022]

<sup>9</sup> "Türkiye'nin Meis açıklaması sonrası Yunan bakandan skandal ifadeler," *Yeni Şafak*, December 29, 2021, <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/turkiyenin-meis-aciklamasi-sonrasi-yunan-bakandan-skandal-ifadeler-3727869> [June 8, 2022]

<sup>10</sup> "Yunanistan'ın adalar provokasyonu," *TRT Haber*, YouTube, June 3, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6a4RTREZC8I&ab\\_channel=TRTHaber](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6a4RTREZC8I&ab_channel=TRTHaber) [June 6, 2022]

<sup>11</sup> "Yunanistan, Türkiye sınırındaki çelik duvarı üç misline çıkarmakta kararlı," *BBC Türkçe*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-61647455> [June 7, 2022]

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<sup>12</sup> "Almanya'dan Erdoğan'a Yunanistan uyarısı," *DW*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/tr/almanyadan-erdo%C4%9Fana-yunanistan-uyar%C4%B1s%C4%B1/a-61998746> [June 6, 2022]

<sup>13</sup> "Yunanistan'da 'Efes Tatbikatı' paniği," *BBC Türkçe*, June 4, 2022, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/yunanistanda-efes-tatbikati-panigi-685740.html> [June 7, 2022]

<sup>14</sup> "5 Soru: ABD'nin Dedeğaç (Yunanistan)'ta Askeri Üs Kurmasının Anlamı ve Türkiye'ye Etkisi," *SETA*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.setav.org/5-soru-abdnin-dedeagac-yunanistanta-askeri-us-kurmasinin-anlami-ve-turkiyeye-etkisi/> [June 13, 2022]

<sup>15</sup> "Turkish media: Mitsotakis was applauded 37 times in 42 minutes in US Congress," *Greek City Times*, May 17, 2022, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2022/05/19/turkish-media-mitsotakis-us-congress/> [June 7, 2022]