

GREEK-TURKISH RELATIONS AT THE CROSSROADS: COOPERATION OR RIVALRY?

Dr. Cihan Dizdaroğlu

The issue of Turkish-Greek relations once more came to the forefront following the most recent developments including Greece's newly signed defence agreements, Turkey's request to acquire F-16s from the US as well as drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is a well-known fact that both Greece and Turkey have long been flexing their muscles over the tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean along with all other routine issues in bilateral relations. This might seem normal as the two neighbouring countries have adopted an aggressive relationship throughout their histories due to security-oriented foreign policies on both sides. However, security orientation both in Greece and Turkey is quite problematic, costly, and time-consuming for everyone, including the allies.

Moreover, it prevents effective cooperation between the two as we witnessed during deadly forest fires in both countries last August. During the wildfires, Turkey politely rejected Greece's offer to assist amid heavy criticism over the government's handling of the fires, whereas it sent two firefighting aircraft to Greece.¹ As a matter of fact, Greece and Turkey have an existing mechanism – a legacy of the devastating earthquakes that hit the two countries in 1999 – to cooperate in the management of natural disasters. The mechanism is known as the Joint Hellenic Turkish Standby Disaster Response Unit (JHET-SDRU). In the atmosphere of rapprochement started in 1999, the JHET-SDRU was signed in 2001 and ratified by the Turkish and Greek parliaments in 2004 and 2006, respectively. With the gradual erosion of the

spirit of the rapprochement on both sides, the two countries have returned to their factory settings of counter balancing.

Although Turkey and Greece held the 63rd round of exploratory talks, which is a legacy of the rapprochement process as well, in Ankara on October 6, the two NATO allies continued to provoke each other through their statements and actions. These actions and the relationship with third parties have the potential to influence not just bilateral relations, but regional and international security, as well. This policy note, therefore, argues that it would benefit each part to find ways for dialogue rather than confrontation since there will be no winner in such a long-term competition, especially considering the two countries' existing capabilities.

The Impact of Security-Oriented Foreign Policy on Bilateral Relations

Security orientation in bilateral relations is not a new phenomenon in Turkish-Greek relations. The foundation of both countries, emerging from battles with one another, shaped their respective national identities and has since driven them to perceive one another as the “unreliable neighbour,” the “other,” or a “potential danger.”² The heavy burden of history as well as long-lasting disputes over a range of issues – even on the number of problems – have paved the way for the domination of security orientation in both countries’ foreign and security policies. Apart from exceptional cooperation periods, the relationship between the two countries has continued to be problematic.

This security orientation is also reflected in the most recent actions of the two. The attempts towards strengthening military capabilities and consolidating partnerships against each other confirm this argument. Only within the past few months, Greece has consecutively signed several defence cooperation agreements with Israel, France, the US, the UK, Egypt, Saudi Arabia among others. The agreements with both France and the US are the most significant due to their wordings and content.

The bilateral agreement and defence pact signed on Sept. 28 between Greece and France will improve Greece armament as it includes the acquisition of three frigates and six Rafale fighter jets. Moreover, through the pact the two countries agreed to mutually assist each other “if any of the countries is at-

tacked, if its territory is challenged, its sovereignty is challenged, then there is an obligation by the other party to assist it.” Even though the two have not explicitly declared any country names, it is clear from the content that the main issue is Turkey and tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. This emphasis even drew attention from NATO and the alliance’s Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg criticized the two for their “efforts outside NATO’s framework.”³

The German Foreign Office also expressed a need to clarify that the pact “is not directed against other partners.”⁴ This stands in stark contrast to what Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis argued: “Greece and France, have already developed a very strong alliance, which essentially goes beyond each other’s obligations within the European Union and NATO.”⁵ This attempt triggered Turkey’s reaction, through which it slammed the French-Greek duo for their “vain dream” that will “undermine NATO alliance itself.”⁶

Likewise, the renewed and expanded Mutual Defence Cooperation Agreement (MDCA) between Greece and the US on October 14 added a new layer to the equation. With the upgraded version of the MDCA, which extended the current one-year duration to five-years, the US will invest in Greek infrastructure and station its troops in locations such as Alexandroupoli and Crete. These combined bilateral agreements show the desire for providing security through non-NATO mechanisms.

Greece – in close partnership with the Republic of Cyprus⁷ (RoC) – has long and success-

fully tried to isolate Turkey as well as to worked to present it as an aggressive actor in international politics. Of course, it should be noted that Turkey's use of foreign policy as a battle ground for domestic interests, its personalization and militarization of foreign policy, and strained relations with its allies and immediate neighbours have helped Greece's policies.⁸

Amid these developments, Turkey has been searching for ways to amend its frosty bilateral relations with regional countries, such as Israel and Egypt to break its isolation for some time. However, the rise in security orientation in Turkish foreign policy, especially since the 2016 coup attempt, continued to produce new crises. With the blurring of the line between domestic and foreign policies, Turkey chose to prioritize its "hard power" capabilities rather than its "soft power." This orientation in foreign policy is likely to result in a greater degree of isolation for Turkey.⁹

In the absence of Turkey's dialogue with regional countries, new regional energy and security alliances began to sprout. The East-Med Gas Forum between Greece, RoC, Italy, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine is one of the developments that left Turkey feeling excluded. The East-Med Gas forum notably excludes Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria. In return, Turkey's policies, such as increasing its naval presence in the region, maintaining regular drilling activities as well as the signing of a delimitation of maritime jurisdiction agreement with the UN-recognized Libyan government on November 27, 2019, are all attempts by Turkey to break the alleged 'siege.'¹⁰

These regional alignments as well as Greek's abovementioned deepening cooperation with third parties come as Turkey is facing disagreements with the US and EU. Even though the relationship between Turkey and the US has continued to be strained, Turkey recently expressed its desire to purchase F-16 fighter jets and modernization kits to upgrade its existing fighters. By doing so, Turkey wants to recover its payments to the F-35 program, from which Turkey was expelled following its decision to acquire S-400 air defence systems from Russia. It is still not clear whether the Biden administration and US congress will sell these jets to Turkey, but it would definitely be "a litmus test for the future of the relationship"¹¹ especially as Greece tries to tip the scale to its favour.

However, the armament policy/race on both shores of the Aegean runs the risk of becoming a conflict between the two as seen in the summer of 2020.¹² Especially, in the absence of mediation by third actors, there is always a risk for an escalation. As long as the two continue to follow security-oriented foreign policies, they will continue to threaten not just the bilateral relation, but the regional peace and stability as well. However, it should be noted, neither Turkey nor Greece has economic capabilities to sustain such a security-oriented approach for the long-term.

Need for Dialogue rather than Confrontation

Even though Greece and Turkey have been allies for many years, both have been maintaining their maximalist positions against each other. Public perceptions as well as decision-

makers' policy choices have entailed such maximalist positions for years. Therefore, it seems costly for any decision-maker to reverse this trend. It is precisely for this reason that decision-makers choose to maintain their security-oriented foreign policies and to try changing the balance of power in their favour.

So far, international actors have played mediator roles between the two to prevent any tensions to transform into a more serious conflict. To recall, Greece and Turkey have hurtled towards a violent conflicts in the Aegean Sea on several occasions – in 1976, 1987, and 1996 – but have always succeeded in defusing escalations through diplomacy and dialogue. Mediation guided by third parties, primarily the United States, or Germany in last year's crisis, has been pivotal in easing tensions.

The current militarization trend on both sides, which is now backed by third parties, has raised some questions as to whether these developments will pave the way for an escalation and more broadly and whether Turkey is being replaced by Greece in its Western alliance. While the short answer for the latter question is that it is not likely to happen, the answer to the first question is less encouraging.

Turkey's relationship with the US and EU has been turbulent over the last few years, however the parties have always found a way for continuation rather than a total breakdown. Therefore, it is possible to argue that it is still in the interest of both the US and the EU to keep Turkey in the fold.¹³ Regarding relations with the EU, it is obvious that the two parties'

have long lost their incentives with each other, and there is a huge lack of confidence in the relationship. There is little sign for change in this relationship although the parties want to reorient relations through a "positive agenda" that includes updating the Customs' Union, maintaining an open dialogue and focusing on cooperation.¹⁴ Given the importance of Turkey in the EU's foreign policy, the EU needs to work with Ankara to rebuild a relationship, which is to both sides' mutual benefit.¹⁵ Rather than waiting for new tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean to flare up, the EU should act as a facilitator – even if it is not a neutral one – between Turkey and its member states, namely Greece and the RoC, to convince parties to work together. The hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean might still play a catalyst role in terms of such change.

The rapprochement period has already demonstrated that stability in the relationship can trigger cooperation in fields ranging from tourism to economy, as well as from transportation to migration. As argued by International Relations Prof. Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, during the summer months the two countries had a sort of informal moratorium of stability that enabled the inflow of tourists, which is highly important for the economies of both countries.¹⁶ The summer of 2020 – amidst the pandemic – was a break from the norm as the parties came to brink of a conflict over the Eastern Mediterranean. Although Greece and Turkey could not manage to transform their dialogue into a durable partnership so far, both parties are very aware of the benefits of stability and dialogue.¹⁷

Therefore, the policy choices of Greece, such as isolating Turkey, triggering Turkey to act in an aggressive manner, deterring Turkey by using third parties, and using Turkey's problems with its partners to exclude it from the common alliances, might be quite risky. If Turkey is being pushed farther away from the West, then Greece could be faced with a more unpredictable neighbour. Likewise, Turkey's policy choices such as prioritizing its hard power capabilities, the personalization of foreign policy for the sake of domestic politics and increasing its military capabilities would not be sustainable in the long run considering its current economic problems and isolation. Both countries thus should continue to search

for new ways to cooperate and to sustain their dialogue. Easing bilateral tensions and changing the security-oriented discourse on both sides' foreign and security policies have already paved the way for a sustained rapprochement process between the two, which is much more beneficial for everyone. Therefore, reviving the trust-building mechanisms would once more trigger a change in bilateral relations as well as set the ground for working together. This starting point should also be followed by decisive policies to enable a change in the mindsets of the two countries' citizens towards "a position overwhelmingly against war and conflict."¹⁸

NOTES

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Dr. Cihan Dizdaroğlu is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Başkent University. He is also IstanPol & hbs fellow at the Istanbul Political Research Institute (IstanPol).

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