

REPORT

# THE AEGEAN AND THE MEDITERRANEAN – BETWEEN DIPLOMACY AND CONFRONTATION WITHOUT THE US AS A POWER BROKER

by VASSIL SOTIROV



**New Geopolitics**

Research Network

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## KEY POINTS

- ✓ For a bigger part of the post-WW2 years the USA had been considered the key force for regional stability in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean projecting its influence by sheer military and economic power and a set of indispensable constant allies like Greece, Turkey and Israel and a number of situational ones.
- ✓ After the Cyprus crisis of 1974 followed by the Turkish invasion and the occupation of the northern part of the island by the Turkish forces, the split between Ankara and Athens on a number of major issues burst out again resulting in a succession of dangerous clashes often bringing the two neighbors to the brink of war.
- ✓ The decision of the United States for a gradual disengagement from the region, which began during the Obama administration and continued through the Trump administration, has coincided with a worsening of US-Turkey relations caused by a number of issues, the most challenging of which has been Turkey's purchase of the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system.
- ✓ Four problems stand out at the heart of the current crises bedeviling the U.S.-Turkey security relationship. First, the framework for cooperation based on the strategic partnership within NATO formed during the Cold War no longer fits the complexity of the relationship today. Second, important policy divergences have created a deficit of trust. Third, erosion of the institutional base has weakened elite support for the relationship today. Fourth, popular support for the relationship in both countries is waning as well.
- ✓ Despite the absence of a grand strategic choice, the rationale behind the Cold War era strategic relationship remains relevant—the geostrategic value of Turkey for the United States' security interests justifying U.S. security reassurance to Turkey. Both countries seem willing to sustain cooperation at the heart of the relationship based on collective territorial defense, as enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, and the issues that fall within the wider reach of NATO, while maintaining bilateral engagement on issues that fall outside of the reach of NATO.
- ✓ Since 2018, an annual Strategic Dialogue has given US-Greece ties major impetus and contributed to a peak in relations not seen in a generation. Beyond regional collaboration, all aspects of the bilateral agenda—energy, military, security, trade and investment cooperation, people-to-people ties—have grown over the course of the Strategic Dialogue.
- ✓ The Aegean issues between Turkey and Greece are multifaceted. The essence of the problem is such that the two sides have fundamentally different perspectives concerning the Aegean. 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, a kind of Greek lake.

- ✓ The crisis knot in the Eastern Mediterranean is too tight. It intertwines both bilateral and multilateral issues of a number of participants and different options are possible for the evolution of the situation in the coming years – both in diplomatic and military-strategic aspects. Complete and simultaneous untying the knot is hardly possible. Tensions may rise on one front and be lowered on another.
- ✓ With the new American administration now all regional powers beginning with Greece and Turkey know that a revival of the transatlantic link is on the horizon and there will be a coordination and genuine search for a common strategic approach.
- ✓ Several possible scenarios for the development of the situation in the region can be identified. 1. Gradual de-escalation and lowering of tensions. This is an option in which each crisis outbreak leads to negotiations and immediate reduction of tensions as a result of international intervention or mediation (by the EU, NATO, OSCE, UN or some of the interested great powers). 2. Dangerous escalation leading to a stalemate and freezing of the crisis as a result of international pressure. This is a likely scenario in the present situation unless Erdogan leaves/loses power in Turkey. 3. Open Military Conflict. This is of course is the least likely option, but still a possible one.
- ✓ A Full-scale war between Greece and Turkey should be ruled out, because it is neither in their interest nor in the interest of the great powers. In the foreseeable future, however, tensions between Greece and Turkey will continue with alternating escalations and attenuations. Instability, military exercises, propaganda, psychological operations and the use of illegal immigration as a political tool, as well as diplomatic balancing on the brink of war – are all likely to continue, with each stakeholder trying to use these tools to his/her advantage for solving own internal and external problems. Attempts to achieve some, albeit partial, results through bilateral negotiations at various levels or through mediation will continue with varying degrees of success, but they will have the character of crisis management.

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence in 2020 of the Eastern Mediterranean as an explosive geopolitical hotspot is a result of a decade of crises, military conflicts and revolts, social disturbances and clashes over energy resources in a vast political space stirred by the Arab revolts, affecting all coastal countries – Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and even Israel.

These turbulent events included the largest in living memory migration wave towards Europe, and the Mediterranean emerged as the risky route to better life for tens of thousands of people fleeing from wars and poverty. For other thousands of them it turned out to be a graveyard because the rich countries on the opposite side of the sea were reluctant to accept them.

The discovery of large natural gas sea deposits in recent years rekindled their ambitions, creating new rivalries in the area and even beyond it. These were added to the old disputes between Greece and Turkey about territorial sovereignty of some Aegean islands, continental shelf, the law of the sea and demarcation of the sea border between the countries. The Greek-Turkish confrontation in the Aegean and the East Mediterranean in the hot summer of 2020 over the exclusive economic zones, access to gas resources, their exploration and transit rights was the latest episode of this changing dynamics.

For a bigger part of the post-WW2 years the USA had been considered the key force for regional stability in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean projecting its influence by sheer military and economic power and a set of indispensable constant allies like Greece, Turkey and Israel and a number of situational ones. Washington used to be the chief international policeman and firefighter, delivering its own perception of justice and democracy to the countries and the peoples here. This helped to cement America's influence and to promote stability in this strategically important region on the southern borders of the Communist bloc.

Washington's and the West's main priority in this region during the Cold War was to counter and contain Soviet geopolitical expansion. An essential part of the US policy was to act as an arbiter or moderator between Greece and Turkey, to balance the interests of these two important NATO allies and to suppress, at least for the time being, the deep Greek-Turkish historical animosities and unresolved disputes, thus saving the unity of NATO and the security construction of the whole Western world.

Turkey, because of its unique geopolitical situation, was given strategic priority due to its geostrategic value in containing the Soviet Union. Later on however the historic contradictions between Greece and Turkey splashed to the surface. After the Cyprus crisis of 1974 followed by the Turkish invasion and the occupation of the northern part of the island by the Turkish forces, the split between Ankara and Athens on a number of major issues burst out again resulting in a succession of dangerous clashes often bringing the two neighbors to the brink of war.

The stakes on all sides now seem higher than they have usually been. This time there is a very real recognition that the international and regional order are undergoing fundamental changes,

within which decoupling the issues that separate Greece and Turkey from the wider regional and European contexts is not possible. And the risk of a real war with unforeseeable consequences is poisoning the atmosphere in this crucial region of the world.

The last several years however were marked by a drive of disengagement by Washington from its traditional posture as a power broker in the region. This is not just a new concept or a change of vision, but a demonstration of the increasing disability of the United States in the changing world to manage tensions between Turkey and Greece and to be a moderator in the disputes between its two NATO allies as America used to do in the past, using its enormous economic and military leverage on both.

No other country or entity is in a position to mediate, support, or, if necessary, pressure the two sides to productively coexist. The European Union, which has made efforts to assume greater responsibility for the Eastern Mediterranean region, will never be seen by Ankara as impartial as long as Greece and Cyprus are members of the EU and Turkey is not. While there is a wide spectrum of opinion within the bloc on how to approach Turkey on its relationship with Greece, from confrontational to conciliatory, Ankara suspects that the EU will always lean in Greece's favor for the sake of member-state solidarity.

Greece, on its part, after the dramatic financial bailout and saving its membership in the euro zone, is also strengthening its military potential, actively building new partnerships and alliances and gaining confidence in its clash with Turkey. Athens has assumed a more proactive role in stabilizing its neighborhood. Its relations with the United States have become increasingly independent of US relations with Turkey. After recovering from its debt crisis – a process strongly supported by Washington, Greece has emerged as a key US ally in reinvigorating the transatlantic cooperation.

Until recently NATO had been an effective platform for facilitating negotiations between Turkey and Greece. However, the alliance lacks the authority of a major power such as the United States and is itself still in search of a new post-Cold war identity, driven by internal differences.

The decision of the United States for a gradual disengagement from the region, which began during the Obama administration and continued through the Trump administration, has coincided with a worsening of US-Turkey relations caused by a number of issues, the most challenging of which has been Turkey's purchase of the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system.

## US-TURKEY RELATIONSHIP IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT MODE

The security relationship between Turkey and the United States has never had a golden age. Since its inception in the 1950s following the Truman Doctrine's promise of support against the Soviet threat and Turkey joining NATO in 1952, the partnership has been important to both countries due to their shared interests on a significant number of issues. Yet, it has also been strained due to their differences in strategic culture and perceptions. More often than not, the relationship has been in crisis management mode.

Crises were somewhat easier to manage during the Cold War. There was a shared threat perception and Turkey conducted a foreign policy that accepted the inherent power asymmetry in its relationship with the United States in return for reassurance against Soviet expansionism. The end of the Cold War changed the dynamics of the relationship fundamentally. Despite the two countries being members of NATO, their relationship today is increasingly transactional, based on shared interests on some issues, potential for convergence on others, and significant divergence on quite a few.

This trend has been growing and getting conflict dimensions ever since Erdogan assumed power in the early 2000's due to his neo-osmanist ambitions to turn Turkey into a key regional power with a central geopolitical role not only in the Balkans and Black sea region, but also in the Middle East and the whole Islamic world. Strains in US-Turkey bilateral and allied relations blew out especially after the failed military coup against Erdogan in 2016, behind which the authoritarian Turkish leader suspected the long American arm. Ankara and Washington often found themselves on different sides among the Syrian opposition forces during the civil war there. At some points direct clashes between US and Turkish forces had to be averted.

Four problems stand out at the heart of the current crises bedeviling the U.S.-Turkey security relationship.

First, the framework for cooperation based on the strategic partnership within NATO formed during the Cold War no longer fits the complexity of the relationship today.

Second, important policy divergences have created a deficit of trust. This has been particularly aggravated by the perceptions each country has about the other. Although Turkey harbors many suspicions toward the United States, three are most prevalent. First, Washington's partnership with the Democratic Union Party - People's Protection Units (PYD-YPG) in Syria, which Turkey treats as an offshoot of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), drives Ankara's perception that Washington could be hostile to Turkey's vital interests. The perception of U.S. interference in Turkish politics is another source of suspicion, which was worsened by the U.S. failure to comply with Turkey's demands to extradite members of the Gülenist network charged for their involvement in the coup attempt of 2016. Unlike Turkey, the United States has not designated this group as a terror organization and has rejected Ankara's extradition demands on grounds of lack of sufficient evidence. Third, Turkey doubts the reliability of the United States as a security partner, which is directly related to Washington's perceived

disregard of Turkish priorities on issues of vital interest. In that respect, the imposition of sanctions over Turkey's purchase of Russian missile systems as well as other defense industry conflicts, in which Congress has played a role, is breeding suspicions in Turkey. Whether or not the perceptions behind their mutual mistrust are completely accurate, they shape policies.

There is distrust on the U.S. side as well. The most deep-rooted concern is whether Turkey is a reliable ally. Turkey's independent stance and reluctance to assist the United States in the Gulf War in 1990, the Iraq War in 2003, and the global coalition against ISIS in 2014 left the United States feeling unsupported. Moreover, Turkey's regional policies, including its rapprochement with Russia, raise suspicions that Ankara could act against U.S. interests. There is also the perception that Turkey pursues an ideological foreign policy, which would create security challenges for the United States and its allies such as Israel and the Gulf monarchies.

Of all these contested issues, arms procurement has been one of the main drivers of divergence and mistrust. While the United States questions Turkey's recent acquisition of S-400 missile system from Russia, Turkey argues that the United States has always been a difficult and reluctant defense supplier, including in the case of air defense systems.

The outstanding dispute between the United States and Turkey over the latter's acquisition of the S-400 missile system from Russia is such a double disagreement issue. While they are deeply divided in terms of the substance, their dispute also is rooted in identifying the proper platform for dealing with it. If such crises cannot be managed, they are threatening to poison all aspects of the relationship and push it to the point of collapse. The ideal situation would be for Turkey not to have S-400s and to instead acquire an air defense system serving its needs that is integrated to NATO, as well as for Turkey to return to the F-35 fighter-jet program. A genuine solution in that respect extends well beyond U.S.-Turkey relations and goes to the very heart of the meaning of the transatlantic alliance. Therefore, this crisis should serve as a reminder of the need for all NATO members to consider bringing defense procurement back to the core of the alliance with all that this entails, including in terms of burden sharing and technology transfers.

Third, erosion of the institutional base has weakened elite support for the relationship today. Under the Cold War strategic partnership framework, the relationship was mainly managed by the two countries' security-military establishments and some political constituencies. However, the new strategic reality has weakened the institutional ownership and led to the erosion of elite support for the relationship. In its better days, there was a network of individuals in the United States and in Turkey who would defend the relationship during crises. Today, Turkey has few friends in Washington, the United States has few friends in Turkey, and those who still value the relationship are in a spiral of silence.

Fourth, popular support for the relationship in both countries is waning as well. The relationship with the United States has been gradually losing its natural constituencies in Turkey as the public sees itself surrounded by enemies (a recent survey conducted by The German Marshall Fund of the United States and İstanbul Bilgi University Center for Migration Research showed

that only 4 percent of Turks said they regard the United States as Turkey's most important partner and 48 percent as the biggest threat to Turkey)<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, there has been a gradual increase in criticism of Turkey in the U.S. public domain. During his election campaign (August 2020) Joe Biden, for example, said he was "very concerned" about President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and that the United States should support the leaders of the opposition parties<sup>2</sup>. The negative public image of Turkey has contributed to Congress taking an adversarial position toward Ankara in recent years. Calls to sanction Turkey for its purchase of Russian weapon systems are gaining wider support on Capitol Hill.

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<sup>1</sup> [Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey-2020](#), Strategies and Tools for Mitigating Polarization in Turkey, December 2020

<sup>2</sup> Asli Aydintaşbaş, Jeremy Shapiro, [Biden and Erdogan Are Trapped in a Double Fantasy](#), Foreign Policy, January 6, 2021

## LOOKING FOR A NEW STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The fact that the two countries are expending a great deal of energy on managing their crises demonstrates that the Turkey-U.S. security relationship today is not well served by its Cold War framework. The debate on sanctions against Turkey in US Congress<sup>3</sup> epitomizes the poor state of the relationship. Several attempts to reset ties and rebuild a relationship on a new foundation, such as the “model partnership”, envisaged during the Obama administration, have failed. Today, experts and policymakers still look for a new definition and restart for the relationship.

The two countries no longer view their engagement as a deliberate and ultimate strategic choice, embedded in a shared normative fabric and multilateral institutions. Rather, the major impetus to sustain the relationship comes from convergence on certain issues directly related to Turkey’s need for security reassurance, on the one hand, and its geopolitical value to the United States, on the other. Despite the absence of a grand strategic choice, the rationale behind the Cold War era strategic relationship remains relevant—the geostrategic value of Turkey for the United States’ security interests justifying U.S. security reassurance to Turkey. Despite all the challenges, both seem willing to sustain cooperation at the heart of the relationship based on collective territorial defense, as enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, and the issues that fall within the wider reach of NATO, while maintaining bilateral engagement on issues that fall outside of the reach of NATO.

There has been an unfolding debate as to how to address the strategic divergence between Turkey and the United States. Some have suggested that the start of a new U.S. administration is a good moment for a reset based on a grand bargain to resolve all the disputes between the two countries. However, this seems unrealistic because their disagreements on different issues are the symptom rather than the cause of the widening strategic divergence. Yet, the opposite track, a purely transactional approach, that has emerged and been recommended recently, cannot provide a sustainable framework either.

Others argue that maybe it is time for Turkey and the United States to divorce. While this may sound easy and attractive to some, it would carry a cost for both as it would be unlikely that either could find an adequate substitute for their current security relationship. The United States does not have any other partner in Turkey’s neighborhood with the same capacity to shape regional developments, let alone with the same geopolitical significance. The United States could perhaps reach most of its foreign policy goals in the region without relying on Turkey’s support, but this would be at a much greater cost. As for Turkey, while it has enjoyed forging new relationships with Russia and other partners at the expense of ties to the United States, these new friends will hardly be a substitute as they have neither the capacity to deliver a reliable connection nor the interest in such a role.

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<sup>3</sup> [Turkey: U.S. Sanctions Under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act \(CAATSA\)](#), Congressional Research Service, December 16, 2020

It remains to be seen what ideas the new Biden administration will launch for reshaping not only the bilateral engagement with Turkey, but also for reviving the transatlantic alliance in general. The challenge to negotiate such a new framework with Turkey is that it has to develop ways to work in agreement and manage disagreements which are inevitable.

## US-GREEK RELATIONS ARE FLOURISHING

Meanwhile a speedy warming is taking place – for almost a decade now – between Washington and Athens parallel to the cooling of feelings with Erdogan’s Turkey. It is a result of intensive diplomatic efforts from both sides but also of the traditionally strong lobbying by the Greek diaspora community. Having helped to secure the country’s European future in the dramatic years of the debt crisis, the United States is sparing no efforts to ensure Greece’s role as a crucial pro-American player at the center of important security issues in the Eastern Mediterranean and a stabilizing force in the region. This policy continued into the Trump years. Greece is not hiding its aspirations to replace Turkey as a regional diplomatic and economic hub and a key NATO bulwark. It is doing exactly what American policymakers ask of allies, namely taking on larger duties of collective defense. Greece already spends a greater share of GDP on defense than any NATO member except the United States<sup>4</sup>.

This reflects how, after decades of cool relations at best, there is a growing national consensus that partnership with the United States should be the keystone of Greek security. Remarkably, this turnaround was led by the leftist government of Alexis Tsipras – a former Communist, who did not hesitate to take up the US interest in a new relationship.

Now his initiatives are being expanded by the government of the center-right, traditionally more pro-American New Democracy Party led by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis who replaced Tsipras after the elections in 2019.

Since 2018, an annual Strategic Dialogue<sup>5</sup> has given US-Greece ties major impetus and contributed to a peak in relations not seen in a generation. Beyond regional collaboration, all aspects of the bilateral agenda—energy, military, security, trade and investment cooperation, people-to-people ties—have grown over the course of the Strategic Dialogue.

This is most evident in the expansion of the US-Greece Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement (MDCA)<sup>6</sup>, cooperation on energy that has resulted in US natural gas reaching 50 percent of Greek LNG imports, and US-supported investments in Greek infrastructure projects that promote regional interconnectedness.

Greece has also gained strategic importance for the United States in the context of major-power competition. In testimony to Congress in June 2018, then-Assistant Secretary of State Wess Mitchell noted that the United States was “cultivating Greece as an anchor of stability” as part of a long-term strategy to bolster the US presence in the region and counter the influence of China and Russia<sup>7</sup>. US officials have spoken of a particularly favorable alignment of interests.

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<sup>4</sup> [Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries \(2013-2020\)](#), NATO HQ Press Release (2020) 104, October 21, 2020

<sup>5</sup> [US Security Cooperation with Greece](#), US Department’s of State Fact sheet, March 25, 2021

<sup>6</sup> Vassilis Nedos, [Defense deal puts Greek-US relations on a new basis](#), Ekathimerini, March 1, 2021

<sup>7</sup> [Hearing before the subcommittee on Europe and regional security cooperation of the committee on foreign relations](#), United States Senate, June 26, 2018

The catalyst for the United States to see Greece as a stabilizing force in the region was the 2018 Prespa agreement between Greece and North Macedonia, which opened the door for North Macedonia to join NATO and reinvigorated the stalled process of integrating the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Greece has actively promoted regional partnerships of American allies that are willing to work together to foster cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Among these, the Israel-Cyprus-Greece partnership in particular has been welcomed in the US Congress, which passed the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act (East Med Act<sup>8</sup>) to address Russian and Chinese influence in the region. The United States has participated in this trilateral partnership through its secretary of state, making it a “3+1”, and has also taken part in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, an intergovernmental organization that promotes energy cooperation in the region. This particularly angered Ankara which has conflicting claims against its neighbors over sea explorations for gas deposits in the region.

Military-to-military cooperation between Greece and the United States is also quickly expanding. In 2019, Souda Bay in Crete became the homeport for US military ships operating in the East Mediterranean. The United States is planning to build a communication center in Crete as well. Bases in Larissa and Stefanovikeio are already being used by US forces, and rotational troops have been invited to use yet more Greek military bases. At the same time, the strategically located port of Alexandroupolis on the northern Aegean coast is also being developed to facilitate US troop movements and NATO exercises<sup>9</sup>. The MDCA has created an opening for US investment and closer cooperation between Washington and Athens, and Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias last year announced intentions to further expand the MDCA and establish a longer-term commitment.

During his Senate confirmation, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted that the bilateral security relationship between the United States and Greece has grown significantly and is important to US interests in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>10</sup>. Congress is asking for more: The 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for the first time requires the Department of Defense to provide “an assessment of the value, cost, and feasibility” of an increased US military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea regions, “to include assessments of [force] posture in Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, and other relevant locations”<sup>11</sup>.

Lockheed Martin is upgrading Greece’s fleet of F-16 fighter aircraft, while Greece contemplates the cost of acquiring the latest 5<sup>th</sup> generation US fighter jets F-35 and the prospects of

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<sup>8</sup> [Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act](#), United States Congress S1102, July 10, 2019

Also: [About the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act](#), The American Hellenic Council, April 9, 2019

<sup>9</sup> [Greece ratifies major new military deal with United States](#), Associated Press, January 30, 2020

<sup>10</sup> [US-Greece security relationship key to American interests in East Med, says Blinken](#), Ekathimerini newsroom, January 22, 2021

<sup>11</sup> George Pagoulatos, Katerina Sokou, [US-Greece relations in the Biden era: Why the road to rebuilding the transatlantic alliance runs through Athens](#), Atlantic Council, February 19, 2021

upgrading its existing frigates as well as building new ones in the Elefsina and Skaramangas shipyards. Athens has also benefited from preferential terms in acquiring second-hand armored vehicles and helicopters from the United States<sup>12</sup>.

Greece is also developing infrastructure that contributes to European energy security and market integration in Southeastern Europe.

Because of its leadership in integrating the region with the rest of Europe, Greece is also seen as a prime candidate to join the Three Seas Initiative and expand the initiative's goal of connecting Eastern Europe to the West to also include the South—adding the Aegean to the trio of the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas<sup>13</sup>.

Greece has also signed its first technology agreement with the United States in forty years.

Last year US ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt to Greece spoke of the enormous positive changes in bilateral relations during his mandate in Athens. He called Greece “a country which shares our values and is increasingly sharing our interests”. He especially noted cooperation on defense and counterterrorism, hailed “our flourishing security relationship” and the “dramatic transformation in energy, where Greece has been one of the strongest partners of the United States in helping advance our agenda on European energy diversification”. Pyatt greeted the Greek “forbearance” in the face of Turkish provocations and called Greece “a gateway for the wider region, but also a significant factor of stability”<sup>14</sup>.

This warming has led to reports and speculation that a new strategic alliance between Greece and the United States could serve as an alternative to Turkey and that the United States is considering Greek islands as an alternative to the Incirlik airbase in Turkey.

Many American observers however share the opinion that abandoning Turkey for Greece (or, hypothetically, vice versa) would not contribute to stability and peace in the region, and it would gravely impact US interests. Encouraging Greece to make concessions regarding its maximalist claims in its disputes with Turkey could arguably embolden nationalistic political forces in Greece, weaken the chances for success of talks between Greece and Turkey, and put the US-Greece relationship in jeopardy.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> [Ambassador Pyatt: Greece as a Geostrategic Ally](#), Atlantic Council Panel, June 11, 2019

## THE AEGEAN AND THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN – BETWEEN DIPLOMACY AND CONFRONTATION

Now, with the Eastern Mediterranean turning into an exceptionally volatile mix of high-end geostrategic stakes, dangerous bilateral tensions, conflicts and potential clashes, involving local, broader regional as well as major world players, minimizing the risks of unpredictable developments and military escalation requires to clearly identify the main sources of those tensions.

While often described as centered on the competition for resources, the new Great Game in the Mediterranean is more fundamentally about power and identity politics. Four different but interrelated stakes appear here<sup>15</sup>:

1. Territorial sovereignty and the law of the sea;
2. Control of resources and transit;
3. The future of alliances;
4. Broader, political and even civilization agendas.

International law about the definition of countries' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), territorial waters or continental shelves is complex and unclear in several ways, which can lead to serious tensions when neighboring countries compete for the control of riches in their waters.

The Aegean issues between Turkey and Greece are multifaceted. They include the delimitation of the continental shelf, the breadth of territorial waters, the demilitarization of the Eastern Aegean islands and airspace problems. All these questions are interlinked: one cannot be settled without solving the others. This is what frames the conflict between Turkey and the thousand-isle Greece. Most of these islands are just several miles off the Turkish coast and solving these disputes is an extremely complicated issue.

The essence of the problem is such that the two sides have fundamentally different perspectives concerning the Aegean. 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, a kind of Greek lake. Any concession to be made would be a concession from the homeland and no government in power would be willing or strong enough to do that.

The conclusion to be drawn from past experiences is that the delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas is a poison in the relations between the two states in the Aegean, which brings them to the brink of war each time a crisis erupts. And they do erupt periodically, stirring nationalistic emotions on both sides of the Aegean and leading to a rapid escalation which compels the leaders of both countries to resort to nationalistic rhetoric that suits their own political agenda.

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<sup>15</sup> Bruno Tertrais, [Whose Sea? Untangling the Eastern Mediterranean Great Game](#), Institut Montaigne, October, 8 2020

Turkey and Greece are facing a choice: either they live under the permanent risk of crisis in their relations, or have the political will and courage to settle the dispute, through negotiations – or through a third-party settlement (the International Court of Justice or the Court of Arbitration) if necessary. However, the historical disputes between them on these issues are so long and heated that they cannot agree even on the subject of the negotiations. Greece, claiming its sovereignty over the islands, guaranteed by acknowledged international treaties, insists that the only item on such an agenda should be a maritime delimitation agreement for the continental shelf and a possible Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Although the delimitation of maritime zones is acknowledged by both parties as the main dispute, Turkey presents a list with an ever increasing number of “unresolved issues”, including questions on sovereignty over certain islands, the demilitarized status of other islands, the delimitation of the Greek territorial sea, the width of the national airspace of Greece and the control of the air traffic in the Aegean. These issues pertain to the core of Greek sovereignty over land, sea and air territory and even challenge long (and bloodily) established borders between the two countries. As such, these contentions exceed the constraints of the bilateral context and become a major destabilization factor for the whole area.

Delimitation of maritime areas in the Aegean Sea and the East Mediterranean are two distinct processes. Whereas the Aegean Sea delimitation is a bilateral process, the delimitation in the East Mediterranean is a multilateral one and even more complex because of political problems that engage many parties. Delimitation in the area involves Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt and Cyprus. As far as Cyprus is concerned, Turkey does not recognize the Greek-run Republic of Cyprus as an independent state, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is recognized only by Turkey. Such a complex political landscape does not allow all the interested parties to sit around a table, unless they are willing to leave their political conflicts aside and initiate a multilateral negotiation process. A multilateral agreement on delimitation of marine spaces may defuse the tension, ensure fair and just exploitation of carbon fuels and other sea resources, and pave the path to peace and stability in the region.

The crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean has become both a severe crisis for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and a litmus test for the European Union (EU). For decades during the Cold Turkey was a front-line member of the Western alliance, controlling its south-eastern flank against Soviet expansionism. Now, however, it is increasingly seen by many members as a “problem” for the Alliance. Instabilities and interventions in the region since the 1990s have given Ankara a particular voice in the North Atlantic Council, fueling internal tensions in Brussels to unprecedented levels. Blocking consensus on many key issues that range from defense plans to relations with non-members, Turkey has been described by European diplomats as “the elephant in the room”<sup>16</sup>. Some European [NATO] members are anxious about Turkey’s leverage on domestically sensitive issues such as immigration or political Islam. Their concerns gained new force with the advent of Recep Erdogan with his nationalistic and pro-Islamic policies.

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Erlanger, [Turkish Aggression Is NATO's 'Elephant in the Room'](#), New York Times, August 3, 2020

Compounding the problem has been Turkey's rapprochement with Russia after the botched coup attempt of July 2016 and its acquisition of Russian S-400 air defense systems in defiance of objections from Washington and NATO. This purchase led to the termination by the Pentagon of Turkish participation in the production of the F-35 fighter-bomber program and the cancellation of the aircraft deliveries that Turkey had already paid for and sent its pilots to the US for training. These unprecedented developments have been supplemented by the face-off between Ankara and its allies in Northern Syria, which was the main cause behind French President Emmanuel Macron's controversial 2019 diagnosis of NATO as a "brain dead" organization<sup>17</sup>.

Turkish nationalists, for their part, believe the country is unjustifiably stigmatized, having "held the fort", so to say, for nearly 40 years but having thus been "imprisoned in the Black Sea". Moreover, the 2016 military coup attempt has heightened their suspicions of Western opposition to Turkey recovering its natural place as a dominant power in its neighborhood. Knowing that it is legally impossible to expel a NATO member country, some of the most vocal figures in Ankara are confident in their position. "If Greece [...] attacks Turkey, it would be the end of the Atlantic Alliance" says Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, the father of the Mavi Vatan (Blue Homeland) doctrine<sup>18</sup>. Ironically, Admiral Cem Gürdeniz was arrested in April 2021 along with other senior retired Navy high ranks, after voicing opposition against Erdogan policies of islamization of the armed forces.

Still, most NATO members are reluctant to confront Ankara. They resent Turkish obstructionism in NATO decision-making, but recognize its military importance to the Alliance. Some European members are also concerned about Turkey's leverage on domestically sensitive issues such as immigration or political Islam. The latest April visit to Ankara by top EU officials Charles Michel and Ursula von der Leyen and their talks with Erdogan is an indication that there is no strong consensus in the EU on how to tackle Turkey. This conciliatory course of behavior by Brussels will continue in spite of EU's harsh rhetoric on a number of major issues.

All this raises the question of how real Turkey's membership in the Western Alliance is against the background of Ankara's apparent rapprochement with Moscow and Beijing on a number of geopolitical vectors, despite all the serious frictions between them. It is obvious that we are talking about civilization dimensions and shared values and approaches in the selection of friends and allies from Ankara under Erdogan. The divergence with the West on this basis inevitably reshapes the geopolitical framework of this entire key region of the world and turns it into an arena of sharp contradictions and clashes with global political, economic and military-strategic consequences.

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<sup>17</sup> Philippe Maze-Sencier, [After declaring NATO "brain-dead" has President Macron brought Europe any closer to strategic autonomy?](#), Institut Montaigne, 12 December 2019

<sup>18</sup> Ryan Gingeras, [Blue homeland: The heated politics behind Turkey's new maritime strategy](#), War on the rocks, June 2, 2020

Also: Lorenzo Vita, [What Turkey Wants](#), InsideOver, 8 September, 2020

Let us not forget that the major reason that led to the latest crisis in the eastern Mediterranean were the systemic factors, two of which were most important. The first one is the US withdrawal from the area, because historically whenever there was a crisis between Turkey and Greece – like we saw many of them in the 1990s – the US would step in to de-escalate the tension between the two NATO allies. The second one is the loss of the EU accession framework in the Turkish-Greek relations, because in the late 1990s and the early 2000s we saw the honeymoon period in the Turkey-Greece relations and this was against the background of Turkey's quest to be a member of the European Union. Both these factors additionally aggravated the crisis.

The revisionist and neo-Ottoman approach of the current Turkish leadership can be considered a particularly dangerous factor. Turkey retains some trump cards hoping to advance its revisionist and expansionist agenda, hoping to overturn the legacy of the Ouchy (1912), Sèvres (1920) and Lausanne (1923) treaties, seen as unjustly depriving the Turks of their lands (and waters). In Erdogan's mind, anything that was Ottoman (...) is naturally bound to become Ottoman again, from the Balkans to Kazakhstan. At the same time, Erdogan does not bother to act with imperial confidence and sultanism, openly challenging the West geopolitically.

There are however other major factors that will affect the outcome of the new geostrategic game in the Eastern Mediterranean and its neighborhood – the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East and Africa. The region has become a theater of direct or indirect interventions by Turkey and Russia – in Iraq, Syria, Libya. Their ambitions are driven by a sense of victimization, ideological strife, political opportunism and economic needs. The "civilizational" dimension of such competition should not be underestimated: while Ankara and Moscow each promote nationalistic policies, both of them rejoin China and Iran in an anti-Western, Eurasia-oriented agenda. Turkey's silence on the treatment of the Uyghurs, which contrasts with its proclaimed defense of Muslims, is attributable to its rapprochement with Beijing, partly for economic reasons.

A key element which may prove a major factor defining the current geopolitical dynamics in the Mediterranean is the future evolution of Russian-Turkish relations. Today, the two countries are partners, but the clout of history, geography and ambition leave the future open. Their empires have fought each other for nearly three centuries. They have indirectly clashed while attempting to carve zones of influence in Syria and Libya. Each of them has a protégé in the Caucasus (Armenia and Azerbaijan respectively).

They compete on the oil and gas market (for access and transit), and could increasingly do so as Turkey reinforces its presence in the Black Sea. This competition may remain a controlled partnership, as it seems now in spite of its inherent contradictions, but it may slip out of control into a nasty clash as was the case just some years ago. The present fragile balance is largely dependent on the personal chemistry between their two authoritarian leaders Vladimir Putin and Recep Erdogan. But their heirs may prove different both in style, vision and intentions and this may re-shape the gambit with major repercussions for the whole enormous Black sea - Aegean - East Mediterranean chessboard.

## TRYING TO MEND REGIONAL IMBALANCES AND PREVENT A WAR IN THE EASTMED

The revisionist behavior of Turkey vis-a-vis its neighbors and its defiant attitude towards its western allies has challenged the balance of power in the region, opening the space for growing Russian influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Erdogan's challenge to the territorial status quo established by international treaties (most notably the Treaty of Lausanne from 1923, as well as the Law of the Sea Convention, which it still has not signed), and his broader revisionist foreign policy mean that a new approach will have to be established. But this requires the setting of clear boundaries on Turkey's expansionist agenda in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Lowering tensions in this turbulent region while developing a coherent and positive vision for its future is a growing challenge for both the US and the EU. The Eastern Mediterranean is a vital region for European security that needs to be stable if the United States is to focus on its other national security priorities. The US withdrawal from the Middle East, accelerated under the Trump presidency, has left a power vacuum. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the conflicts in Syria and Libya have turned into proxy wars and have caused mass migration and projected instability to the wider region and the shores of the European Union. In recent years, in the absence of a common strategic approach by the United States and EU, Turkey and Russia have filled the regional vacuum.

Just a week after Biden's presidential inauguration US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that the two sides (USA and EU) would "work together on issues of mutual concern" with regard to Turkey<sup>19</sup>.

In response, the EU has indicated a renewed interest in working with the United States to engage Turkey, understanding that a renewed US engagement can be a catalyst for a more effective "carrot and stick" approach to Ankara.

Certainly the change in the US administration makes a big difference because ultimately the last 4 years under the Trump administration were characterized on one side by very erratic US behavior. Trump tolerated to a great extent president Erdogan and acted as a "paper tiger", failing to enact his threat of sanctions on him for the purchase of Russian S-400 missiles. On the other, and perhaps more importantly, Erdogan was emboldened by a profound disconnect between the EU and the US.

With the new American administration now all regional powers beginning with Greece and Turkey know that a revival of the transatlantic link is on the horizon and there will be a coordination and genuine search for a common strategic approach. This obviously creates a different climate in the transatlantic community and in NATO in particular where Turkey for

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<sup>19</sup> [Statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Call with Head of Cabinet Bjoern Seibert of the European Commission](#), The US White House, January 28, 2021

years had been blocking consensus on many key issues that range from defense plans to relations with non-members. Ankara cannot close its eyes to this change of the global situation against it. We have to wait and see if the Alliance with its general secretary will regain the traditional role of a prime actor in actually ensuring that the talks between Greece and Turkey resume.

## POSSIBLE SCENARIOS AND OUTCOMES

The crisis knot in the Eastern Mediterranean is too tight. It intertwines both bilateral and multilateral issues of a number of participants and different options are possible for the evolution of the situation in the coming years – both in diplomatic and military-strategic aspects. Complete and simultaneous untying the knot is hardly possible. Tensions may rise on one front and be lowered on another.

For the time being, the dominating path is: controlling the alternating crises and negotiating some of the most heated momentous disputes and contradictions in order to avoid radicalization of the positions, which could lead to a military conflict. This has happened more than once in the past, especially between Greece and Turkey, but a mechanism has always emerged – international or bilateral – to ease tensions. However, there are always unforeseen circumstances which can get things out of hand.

We can identify several possible scenarios for the development of the situation in the region.

### Scenario 1: Gradual de-escalation and lowering of tensions

This is an option in which each crisis outbreak leads to negotiations and immediate reduction of tensions as a result of international intervention or mediation (by the EU, NATO, OSCE, UN or some of the interested great powers). In the last confrontation between Greece and Turkey last summer, the two countries themselves announced the creation of such a bilateral mechanism for crisis management. However, not everyone is suitable for such a mediation mission. NATO, for example, cannot be a “fire extinguisher” between Turkey and Greece because both countries are its members, but can only provide an umbrella for confidence-building military talks (recall also that Cyprus is not a member of NATO). Germany, as a member of the EU is a partner of Greece and cannot be seen as a disinterested party even though it played a useful role in defusing the tensions during the summer. Russia hinted that it could play such a role – but Turkey does not seem keen on this option. A possible option would be for the United States to play an honest broker role between Greece and Turkey, as it did in 1974 and 1996.

For a longer-term settlement, many avenues could coexist. Turkey would like all major disputes to be put on the table, due to their interconnections. A multilateral conference as suggested by the EU could be an option, but it is unlikely that all actors would agree on its agenda. Separately, an arbitration of international legal issues between Athens and Ankara by a court would certainly be desirable, but the two countries disagree on the possible agenda (only the EEZs for Athens, all territorial and status issues for Ankara). Direct negotiations between Greece and Turkey have been attempted before – and took place between 2002 and 2016, but remain equally difficult to imagine given that only one of the two sides appears interested in changing the status quo. More generally, it is hard to disagree with the Greek (and, increasingly, European) stance that Ankara’s aggressive and/or provocative behavior in the region does not create the proper atmosphere for a rational arbitration or negotiation.

Scenario 2: Dangerous escalation leading to a stalemate and freezing of the crisis as a result of international pressure

This is a likely scenario in the present situation unless Erdogan leaves/loses power in Turkey. It is in his style to provoke several of the parties involved to resort, separately or collectively, to shows of economic and military strength in order to pressure him to de-escalate tensions or to diffuse an imminent military clash. Turkey for example is particularly vulnerable to European sanctions (the EU represents one third of its exports and half of its imports), especially in the current economic and monetary woes it is experiencing. Besides, the EU holds the cards of the accession process, which is still technically open, and can apply incentives such as a renewed customs union or freedom of movement for Turks. A powerful last resort weapon is the closure of Turkey's land and sea borders to the west – a measure which can practically paralyze its economy.

It is doubtful that consensus could be reached in Brussels for harsh sanctions against Ankara, especially as long as Turkey appears to hold the keys to the emigration gates. Still, proponents point out that Erdogan has proven to be receptive to pressure and shows of force. Such measures could be implemented by individual countries or coalitions of the willing, especially if the United States decides to harden its attitude.

Other provocations and aggressive gestures are possible and even likely in the current political climate prevailing in Ankara. It has also been widely debated if Erdogan could decide to leave the NATO integrated military structure, or even leave the Alliance altogether in answer to such pressure from the West, even though most of Turkey's allies would disagree that it would be in his interest to do so.

Such an outcome could split Turkish society and cause a deep internal crisis which could sweep the regime from power, or expose the country to international isolation and security deficiency.

Scenario 3: Open Military Conflict

This is of course the least likely option, but still a possible one. A number of analysts share a pessimistic view that the current tensions in this wide area ranging from the Balkans to Caspian Sea resemble similar patterns in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with a chain of regional conflicts paving the way for a broader war. This parallel however has obvious limitations. Turkey is again the most unpredictable element in this chain, but open, large-scale military aggression is unlikely, because Erdogan is almost certainly not interested in a major war (especially since the Turkish armed forces have yet to recover from the fallout of the 2016 unsuccessful coup and the ensuing purges). But a fait accompli or a serious incident between navies (or air forces) in the Aegean, around Cyprus, or in northern Syria, northern Iraq or Libya should now be considered a high-probability scenario. Turkey has problematic relation with most of its neighbors. A number of proxy wars raging or simmering in the region, in which Turkey is involved in one way or another, involve real risks of creeping into a larger war. Whether or not this could lead to escalation would, as always, depend on the willingness and ability of the main strategic actors to defuse the tension.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. A Full-scale war between Greece and Turkey should be ruled out, because it is neither in their interest nor in the interest of the great powers. In the foreseeable future, however, tensions between Greece and Turkey will continue with alternating escalations and attenuations. Instability, military exercises, propaganda, psychological operations and the use of illegal immigration as a political tool, as well as diplomatic balancing on the brink of war – are all likely to continue, with each stakeholder trying to use these tools to his/her advantage for solving own internal and external problems. Attempts to achieve some, albeit partial, results through bilateral negotiations at various levels or through mediation will continue with varying degrees of success, but they will have the character of crisis management.
2. The latest crisis over Turkey's claims to an exclusive economic zone and ownership of gas fields in the disputed zone is just a façade behind Erdogan's bid to win propaganda points in disputes with Greece over the demarcation of maritime borders and the right to transit crossing, over the shelf and airspace around the Aegean islands (which are almost entirely Greek), to revise the internationally recognized treaties fixing the status quo and sovereignty over these islands. All these claims are part of more far-reaching and broader plans for Turkish geopolitical hegemony in the region.
3. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is aware that Turkey's chances of achieving its maximalist goals by force are unrealistic, because Turkey would find itself in international isolation. Western countries do not want a clash between two NATO members, and he himself would not want to risk Turkey's membership in the Alliance or the imposition of severe economic sanctions on his country. However, Erdogan tends to bluff in his threats and serve his partners with *fait accompli*, which is the most risky element in the region's geopolitical game. The question is whether, in his attempts to bluff and maneuver, he will not step – intentionally or unintentionally – on any of the red lines imposed by the international community, which would provoke a military confrontation. Then his dream of returning the Ottoman heritage could turn into a new catastrophe for Turkey.
4. Greece is a country that takes much better account of its real capabilities and long-term interests and pursues a policy that serves those interests best. It seeks to maintain a balance in its integration into European and Atlantic institutions, conducts adequate diplomacy in search of credible allies and invests in its security in order to maintain its ability to counter perceived threats it says have historically emanated from Turkey. Athens is well aware that unilateral action and/or disruption in bilateral and regional relations will have catastrophic consequences for the country and for the region, and acts accordingly.
5. There is reason to believe that Turkey also wants ordered closure of disputes in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, rather than disruption, as it navigates the

unchartered waters of disengagement from the West. But this trend in Turkish policy and behavior will be more vividly displayed after an eventual change of leadership in Ankara. The pressure from both Europe and the United States on Greece, Turkey and Cyprus for a long standing and historic settlement might well be the channel for protracted and complicated negotiations that could bring about the much needed paradigm shift in Greek-Turkish relations towards a more positive, forward-looking model of engagement. The stakes are high, success is by no means guaranteed, but failure is not an option either.

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