

Adrift, at Home and Abroad: What's Driving Turkey's Foreign Policy Toward Greece?

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December 2022

SNAPSHOT

SUMMARY

- At a time when Russia's war on Ukraine has made NATO unity all the more urgent, Turkey has returned to a policy of aggression toward Greece. After a brief period of calm, Turkey has initiated diplomatic spats and even threatened Athens with outright conflict over disputes regarding small islands in the Aegean Sea.
- Several factors are likely shaping President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's hardline approach: the legacy of long-standing bilateral feuds with Greece, the Turkish president's reactions to shifting regional dynamics that have left Turkey isolated, and his hope to boost his popularity ahead of crucial elections in Turkey in 2023.
- Turkey is unlikely to de-escalate tensions with Greece any time soon, at least until after the elections.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey and Greece, two neighbors separated by the Aegean Sea in the eastern Mediterranean, have quibbled over their respective rights in these waters—and the islands in them—for decades. Conflict between the NATO allies has waxed and waned, peaking with crises over the island nation of Cyprus in 1974 and the island of Imia-Kardak

in 1995. After the two countries once again came to the brink of war over maritime rights in the eastern Mediterranean in 2020, the newly elected Biden administration, seeking to solidify NATO unity, stepped in to encourage dialogue between Ankara and Athens. The intervention appeared to work: At the NATO summit in June 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan praised the revival of diplomatic engagement with Greece.¹

1. Tuvan Gumrukcu and Ece Toksabay, "Erdoğan, at NATO meet, praises revival of Turkey-Greece dialogue," Reuters, June 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/erdogan-nato-meet-praises-revival-turkey-greece-dialogue-2021-06-14/>

But that conciliatory tone lasted less than a year. Tensions flared up again in May 2022, when Erdoğan lashed out at Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, saying that the premier “no longer exists” for him.² Then, in September, he explicitly threatened Greece with open conflict, warning ominously that Turkey could “come down suddenly one night.”³ The following month, Erdoğan created a scene at a private dinner of the European Political Community in Prague, interrupting Mitsotakis’s speech by accusing him of insincerity in settling bilateral disputes, starting a shouting match, and repeating his threats against Greece.⁴

Why, at a time when Russia’s war on Ukraine has made NATO unity all the more urgent, has Erdoğan returned to a policy of aggression toward Greece? Drawing on a recent POMED roundtable held jointly with the Heinrich Boell Foundation, Washington, D.C., this Snapshot describes the geopolitical and domestic factors that seem to be motivating Turkey’s rediscovered hostility toward Greece. With Turkey feeling isolated and beleaguered amid a shifting regional balance of power in Greece’s favor, and with Erdoğan vulnerable ahead of momentous elections in Turkey next year, Ankara is unlikely to seek normalcy with Athens any time soon.

THE AEGEAN ISLANDS AND CYPRUS GAS DISPUTES

At the heart of the current round of tensions lies a dispute over the status of a group of small islands, inhabited and uninhabited, in the Aegean

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Sea between Turkey and Greece. According to decades-old international treaties, the islands, although within sight of the Turkish shoreline, belong to Greece but must maintain non-military status.⁵ For a long time, these islands were not a flashpoint between the neighbors, but that changed earlier this year, when Ankara began to publicly accuse Athens of having gradually stationed troops and weapons on the islands in recent years, effectively militarizing them.⁶ Greece, for its part, both disputes Ankara’s interpretation of the treaties and points to Turkey’s growing military presence on its own western coast, as well as numerous instances of Turkey violating Greek airspace, to justify its military buildup on the islands.⁷ Both sides now accuse the other of violating international law.

This sparring in the Aegean builds on longer-running tensions over maritime rights further south, off Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean. Since the 1970s, the island has been divided between the internationally recognized, Athens-backed, Greek Cypriot Republic of Cyprus (ROC) in the south and a Turkey-backed, Turkish Cypriot administration in the north. But that long-standing

2. Ece Toksabay and Angeliki Koutantou, “Turkey’s Erdogan Says Greek PM Mitsotakis ‘No Longer Exists’ for Him,” Reuters, May 23, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkeys-erdogan-says-greek-pm-mitsotakis-no-longer-exists-him-2022-05-23/>

3. Zeynep Bilginsoy, “Turkish Leader Erdogan Ups Rhetoric on Greece amid Tensions,” Associated Press, September 3, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/nato-greece-turkey-middle-east-adcd3f53d5e9efa43cff07a184536ec4>

4. Steven Erlanger, “Elections Approaching, Erdogan Raises the Heat Again With Greece,” New York Times, October 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/16/world/europe/turkey-elections-erdogan-greece.html>

5. The treaties are between Turkey and Greece in 1923 and Greece and Italy in 1947.

6. Tevfik Durul, “Yunanistan uluslararası anlaşmalara rağmen Doğu Ege adalarını silahlandırıyor [Greece militarizes east aegean islands despite international agreements],” Anadolu Agency, February 18, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/yunanistan-uluslararası-anlaşmalara-ragmen-dogu-ege-adalarini-silahlandiriyor/2506398>

7. Patrick Kingsley, “Tiny Islands Make for Big Tensions Between Greece and Turkey,” *New York Times*, April 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/21/world/europe/greece-turkey-islands.html>; Ryan Gingeras, “Dogfight Over the Aegean: Turkish-Greek Relations in Light of Ukraine,” *War on the Rocks*, June 8, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/dogfight-over-the-aegean-turkish-greek-relations-in-light-of-ukraine/>



conflict took a new turn in 2011, when the ROC granted permits to international energy companies to explore natural gas off the island's shores.⁸ Calling these waters contested, Turkey demanded that all drilling near the island cease until a unification deal could ensure the fair sharing of the newfound resources among the island's Turkish and Greek populations. Ignored by the ROC and the energy companies alike, Turkey began to deploy its own seismic vessels to those waters—and, since 2017, to send its warships to accompany the vessels and to intercept other research ships.⁹ Calling Turkey's moves "illegal," Greece then started sending its own ships to the same region to conduct naval exercises. In August 2020, the competing Turkish and Greek navies faced off in the eastern Mediterranean, threatening a wider

military confrontation between the NATO allies.¹⁰ Tensions only eased last year after Turkey, responding to European Union (EU) sanctions and the Biden administration's encouragement of a diplomatic solution, pulled its vessels back from the disputed waters and agreed to negotiations with Greece.

SHIFTING GEOPOLITICS

While the disputes over Cyprus and the Aegean islands are far from new, both geopolitical and domestic political factors have recently whetted Ankara's appetite for aggression toward Athens, turning these disputes into crises. One such factor is Turkey's growing sense of isolation in the eastern Mediterranean amid a deepening alliance among Egypt, Greece, Israel, and the

8. "Cyprus Begins Controversial Oil and Gas Drilling," BBC, September 19, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-14968737>

9. Elias Hazou, "Turkey carries out seismic surveys north of the island," Cyprus Mail, November 27, 2013, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2013/11/27/turkey-carries-out-seismic-surveys-north-of-the-island/>; "Turkey sends frigate to East Med to protect seismic vessel Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa," *Daily Sabah*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2018/10/24/turkey-sends-frigate-to-east-med-to-protect-seismic-vessel-barbaros-hayreddin-pasa>; Michele Kambas, "Standoff in High Seas as Cyprus Says Turkey Blocks Gas Drill Ship," Reuters, February 11, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyprus-natgas-turkey-ship/standoff-in-high-seas-as-cyprus-says-turkey-blocks-gas-drill-ship-idUSKBN1FV0X5>

10. Gul Tuysuz, "NATO allies are facing off in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Conflict Could Entangle the Entire Region," CNN, August 26, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/25/europe/greece-turkey-eastern-mediterranean-tension-intl/index.html>

ROC. By clashing with Israel and Egypt over policies toward Islamist groups and other contentious regional issues, Erdoğan prompted the pair to deepen their diplomatic and security ties with the ROC and Greece.¹¹ In the last decade Israel and Egypt have each held trilateral summits and joint military drills with Greece and the ROC. In 2019, the four countries (together with Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority) officially formed the “East Mediterranean Gas Forum,” intensifying Turkey’s sense of isolation.¹² Ankara realized that as its relations with its neighbors deteriorated, the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean was shifting strongly toward Greece.

Dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa exacerbated the problem. In part due to competition with Turkey for regional influence after the Arab Spring, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia not only took historic steps to establish diplomatic ties with Israel, but also strengthened defense and economic cooperation with Greece.¹³ This new regional alignment left Turkey (and the fledgling Government of National Accord in Libya) on one side and a powerful bloc of Egypt, Greece, Israel, the ROC, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE on the other. Today, this dynamic is a key driver of Erdoğan’s pursuit of rapprochement with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and, most recently, Egypt, with Turkey’s bridge-building meant to reaffirm its presence in the eastern Mediterranean and to show Athens that it cannot cut Ankara out of the equation. Indeed, after Erdoğan’s first-ever handshake with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Doha in November following nearly a decade of estrangement, the Turkish leader said that his

“only expectation” from Cairo was that it “establish peace together against those who take a stand against [us] in the Mediterranean.”¹⁴

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A related dynamic involves Turkey’s relations with the West—particularly the loss of Turkey’s competitive advantage vis-à-vis Greece in U.S. foreign policy. Tellingly, Erdoğan’s outburst against Mitsotakis in May followed the Greek premier’s eventful visit to Washington earlier that month, during which Mitsotakis not only met with President Joe Biden at the White House but also addressed the U.S. Congress, a privilege enjoyed by few world leaders (Erdoğan not among them).¹⁵ Indeed, as U.S.-Turkish defense ties have worsened in the wake of Turkey’s growing military relationship with Russia since 2017, the United States has increasingly turned to Greece and the ROC as alternative partners. Last year, the

11. Patrick Nopens, “Geopolitical Shifts in the Eastern Mediterranean,” Egmont Institute, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06603>

12. “Update 1-East Mediterranean States Formally Establish Egypt-Based Gas Forum,” Reuters, September 22, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-energy-idAFL5N2GJ2BC>; Mohamed Saied, “Is New Energy League an Alliance against Ankara?” Al-Monitor, January 22, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/01/gas-regional-market-eastern-mediterranean-cairo-ankara.html>

13. “Greece, Saudi Arabia Sign Raft of Agreements during Crown Prince’s Visit,” *Kathimerini*, July 27, 2022, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1190031/greece-saudi-arabia-sign-raft-of-agreements-during-crown-princes-visit/>; Tom Ellis, “The UAE Joins Greece’s Network of Alliances,” *Kathimerini*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/1163319/the-uae-joins-greece-s-network-of-alliances/>

14. “Erdoğan-Sisi meeting to start to develop bilateral ties: Egypt,” Duvar English, November 21, 2022, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/erdogan-sisi-meeting-to-start-to-develop-bilateral-ties-egypt-news-61558>

15. “Kyriakos Mitsotakis Addresses Joint Meeting,” U.S. House of Representatives, May 17, 2022, <https://www.house.gov/feature-stories/2022-5-17-kyriakos-mitsotakis-addresses-joint-meeting>

Biden administration significantly expanded U.S. defense ties with Greece through a new cooperation agreement.¹⁶ This followed a major shift in Washington's historic policy of neutrality toward the ROC: In 2019, just as Congress imposed sanctions on Turkey's defense industry because of its cooperation with Russia, lawmakers introduced a bill to lift the United States' decades-long arms embargo on the ROC. In September, the Biden administration announced that U.S. defense trade with the ROC would officially resume in 2023.¹⁷

The Europeans have followed a similar course of tilting more toward Athens. Frustrated by Erdoğan's use of gunboat diplomacy, European states have become more vocal in their support for the ROC and Greece in their maritime disputes with Turkey. The EU imposed sanctions on Turkey in November 2019, accusing Ankara of deliberately provoking conflict in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁸ Since then, France has deepened its military relationship with Greece, inking a major defense pact in September 2021.¹⁹ Most recently, Germany appeared to green-light Greece's deployment of 40 German tanks near the Greek-Turkish border. Asked to comment on the move during a visit to Athens in October, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz refused to weigh in, simply noting that "Greece is a very reliable partner."²⁰

Although Erdoğan's own aggressive policies clearly play a large role in the shifting balance of power in Greece's favor, Erdoğan and his government place the blame on Athens



Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (left) and French President Emmanuel Macron announce their signing of a major defense agreement, September 28, 2021. Photo credit: Kyriakos Mitsotakis Facebook page

and resent Greece's ability to exploit Turkey's deteriorating international image for its benefit. For Ankara, Mitsotakis's recent visit to Washington appears to have been the final straw, pushing Erdoğan over the edge to a firmly anti-Greek position.

16. Constantine Atlamazoglou, "A New Deal and a Major Operation Show how the US Military is Bulking Up in a Tense Corner of Europe," *Business Insider*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-greece-expand-defense-cooperation-amid-tension-with-turkey-russia-2021-11>; Humeyra Pamuk, "Blinken Says Renewed U.S.-Greece Defense Deal to Advance Stability in Eastern Mediterranean," *Reuters*, October 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/greece-says-renewed-defence-deal-with-us-protect-sovereignty-both-2021-10-14/>

17. Ned Price, "Lifting of Defense Trade Restrictions on the Republic of Cyprus for Fiscal Year 2023," *Press Statement*, U.S. Department of State, September 16, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/lifting-of-defense-trade-restrictions-on-the-republic-of-cyprus-for-fiscal-year-2023/>

18. "Turkey's Illegal Drilling Activities in the Eastern Mediterranean: Council Adopts Framework for Sanctions," *Press Release*, Council of the EU and the European Council, November 11, 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/11/11/turkey-s-illegal-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-council-adopts-framework-for-sanctions/>

19. "France and Greece Hedge their Bets with a New Defence Pact," *The Economist*, October 2, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2021/10/02/france-and-greece-hedge-their-bets-with-a-new-defence-pact>

20. Hans von der Burchard and Nektaria Stamouli, "Germany's Scholz exhorts Turkey to respect Greek 'sovereignty,'" *POLITICO Europe*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-olaf-scholz-turkey-greece-sovereignty-island-dispute/>

HAWKS AND ELECTIONS

Geopolitics, however, is only part of the story: Domestic politics plays a major role in Turkey's foreign policy decisions. Erdoğan's political alliance with ultranationalists in Turkey has strongly influenced the militarization of Turkish foreign policy, including toward Greece. Since 2015, Erdoğan has relied on ultranationalist political actors to win elections, and he has empowered them at the expense of more moderate factions within the foreign ministry and the military. The institutionalization of Erdoğan's presidential system in 2018 has given ultranationalist factions an outsized influence over foreign policy decision-making.²¹ In response to tensions in the eastern Mediterranean, such factions fashioned a maximalist and aggressive new doctrine called the "Blue Homeland," which argues that Turkey is entitled to expansive territorial waters and maritime rights in the eastern Mediterranean and encourages the government to defend these rights through military aggression and, when necessary, use of force.²²

Today, Erdoğan has a strong reason to let these hawkish security officials run wild on Greece. He is facing presidential and parliamentary elections in mid-2023, and the country's economy is in dire straits. As a result of the devastating economic crisis, Erdoğan's popularity among the electorate has dropped to its lowest point in two decades.²³ To win, Erdoğan

needs to distract the electorate from the mess he has made of the Turkish economy. Showing his keen awareness of Erdoğan's motives, Mitsotakis told reporters this month, "If we had inflation running at 85 percent in Greece, I would also be trying to change the subject."²⁴

ERDOĞAN'S ELECTORAL PREDICAMENT IS A CRUCIAL FACTOR MOTIVATING HIS POLICY TOWARD GREECE.

Indeed, Erdoğan's electoral predicament is a crucial factor motivating his policy toward Greece.²⁵ As one Turkish scholar explained to POMED, Erdoğan wants a "controlled crisis," a conflict in which he can project power and demonstrate his strength but that falls short of a costly war.²⁶ Greece is a convenient target for such a crisis: A show of force against Greece would not only satisfy the ultranationalists already allied with Erdoğan but also potentially appeal to secular nationalists among the opposition. For years, Turkey's opposition parties have been using Greece's militarization of the disputed Aegean islands as a stick with which to beat Erdoğan, while opposition-aligned media have long bashed his government for failing to

21. İlhan Uzgel, "Turkish Foreign Policy After Presidentialism," Middle East Institute, October 25, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkish-foreign-policy-after-presidentialism>

22. Kareem Fahim, "Amid Mediterranean Tensions, Retired Turkish Admiral grabs the Spotlight Touting Supremacy at Sea," *Washington Post*, September 27, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/turkey-greece-blue-homeland/2020/09/26/15cf7afe-fc3b-11ea-830c-a160b331ca62_story.html; Ryan Gingeras, "Blue Homeland: The Heated Politics Behind Turkey's New Maritime Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/blue-homeland-the-heated-politics-behind-turkeys-new-maritime-strategy/>

23. Merve Tahiroğlu, "Cronies in Crisis: Economic Woes, Clientelism, and Elections in Turkey," POMED, October 28, 2022, <https://pomed.org/snapshot-cronies-in-crisis-economic-woes-clientelism-and-elections-in-turkey/>

24. Costas Kantouris and Demetris Nellas, "Greece Slams Turkey's Temporary Entry Ban on Official," Associated Press, November 5, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-middle-east-greece-turkey-european-union-948a01c5d4f6db7af8b4dea433e8be96>

25. Steven Erlanger, "Elections Approaching, Erdogan Raises the Heat Again With Greece," *New York Times*, October 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/16/world/europe/turkey-elections-erdogan-greece.html>

26. Author's interview with an international relations professor in Turkey, October 2022.



Greece's Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (left) meets with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the sidelines of the NATO summit, in Brussels, Belgium, June 14, 2021. Photo credit: Murat Cetinmuhurdar/Presidential Press Office

confront Greece more forcefully on the issue.²⁷ Such a narrative has helped boost suspicions about Greece across the political spectrum in Turkey. As the Turkish scholar noted, in Ankara circles, the debate over Greece is not between “moderates and hardliners,” but rather between “hawks and even more hawks.”²⁸

Nevertheless, a military conflict with Greece is ultimately unlikely to win Erdoğan the elections. Polls indicate that the hawkish attitudes of Turkey's political elite, whether in government or opposition, do not seem to resonate much with the broader public. Only a small minority of Turkish people, for example, even seems aware of the “Blue Homeland” concept, let alone able to articulate its meaning. In a September 2022 opinion poll, more than 60 percent of respondents across Turkey said they did not consider Greece an enemy, despite the tensions. Fifty-two percent, in fact, regarded

the escalating crisis as a mere election ploy by Erdoğan.²⁹ Short of a direct military attack by Greece on Turkey, the crisis looks unlikely to deliver an electoral victory for Erdoğan.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing disputes between Turkey and Greece have wide repercussions. They significantly hurt Turkey's international image and relationships with both the United States and European allies, and they threaten Greece's sense of security in the eastern Mediterranean. They also hurt NATO's image as a strong, unified alliance—at a time when the alliance is most keen on projecting strength against an aggressive, militarist Russia.

Unfortunately for all involved, Ankara's hostile attitude toward Greece is unlikely to change soon—at least until Turkey's upcoming

27. “Eyyü dünya lideri! Yunan, adalarımıza el koydu haberin var mı?” [Hey world leader! Greece has taken over our islands, are you aware?], *Sözcü*, August 9, 2014, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2014/gundem/eyyu-dunya-lideri-yunan-adalarimize-el-koydu-haberin-var-mi-573827/>; “AKP hükümetinde ‘Ada’ çatlağı” [‘Island’ crack in the AKP government], *Sözcü*, September 1, 2015, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2015/gunun-icinden/akp-hukumetinde-ada-catlagi-925125/>

28. Author's interview with an international relations professor in Turkey, October 2022.

29. Ragıp Soylu, “Turkey: New Poll Shows Most Believe Crisis with Greece Triggered by Elections,” *Middle East Eye*, September 14, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-greece-tensions-triggered-elections-poll>

elections. While picking fights with Greece may not be Erdoğan's safest bet to an election victory, such moves may still help him politically, especially by stripping the nationalist opposition's ability to criticize him vis-à-vis Greece. At the very least, displaying aggression against Greece will surely satisfy Erdoğan's nationalist friends

in Ankara's security circles, solidifying those alliances. Greece, meanwhile, is itself facing contentious elections in 2023, giving Athens its own incentive to continue the fight with Turkey, inevitably provoking a response from Ankara. Given the stakes, neither side is likely to de-escalate tensions until after these votes are held.



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