
A Maritime Dispute In the Mediterranean: Assessing the Greece-Turkey Relationship Through the Lens of Neorealism

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INTRODUCTION

Since the summer of 2020, tensions have run high in the Mediterranean due to disagreement over the equitable delimitation of maritime zones and offshore energy resources between Greece and Turkey. In essence, Turkey claims a 189,000 square kilometer Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Mediterranean Sea, based on the criteria of relative coastal length, proportionality, distance, and non-encroachment. This area overlaps with Greece's potential EEZ that extends from Cyprus to Egypt to the Greek island of Crete. Both countries refer to the UN Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to support their claims. Turkey is a non-signatory to the treaty but observes its provisions as common law in practice. The nations have agreed to have exploratory talks in order to find common ground that will lead to a mutually acceptable solution between them. However, Turkey expects that the talks will review all of the bilateral problems, including territorial waters, demilitarization of Greek islands, and ownership rights

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over “gray zones” in the Aegean Sea. Greece, on the other hand, wants to keep the scope of talks confined to the EEZ delimitation issue in the Aegean and the Mediterranean. Both parties are aware that any armed conflict over maritime zones could quickly spill into other domains and escalate into a full-scale war. This article analyzes the dispute’s causal factors and implications to offer insights into power dynamics, quest for security, and hegemony in a turbulent region. By comparing their divergent views through the theoretical tradition of decision-making in neorealism, the article aims to disclose opportunities, constraints, and risk factors for Greece and Turkey. In addition, it provides an assessment of other regional concerns in the equation and their impact on the various countries. The assessment explores distribution of power at the regional level and suggests that the key dynamic is a mixed-motive security dilemma that produces carefully calibrated tit-for-tat behavior and a spiral of arms race.

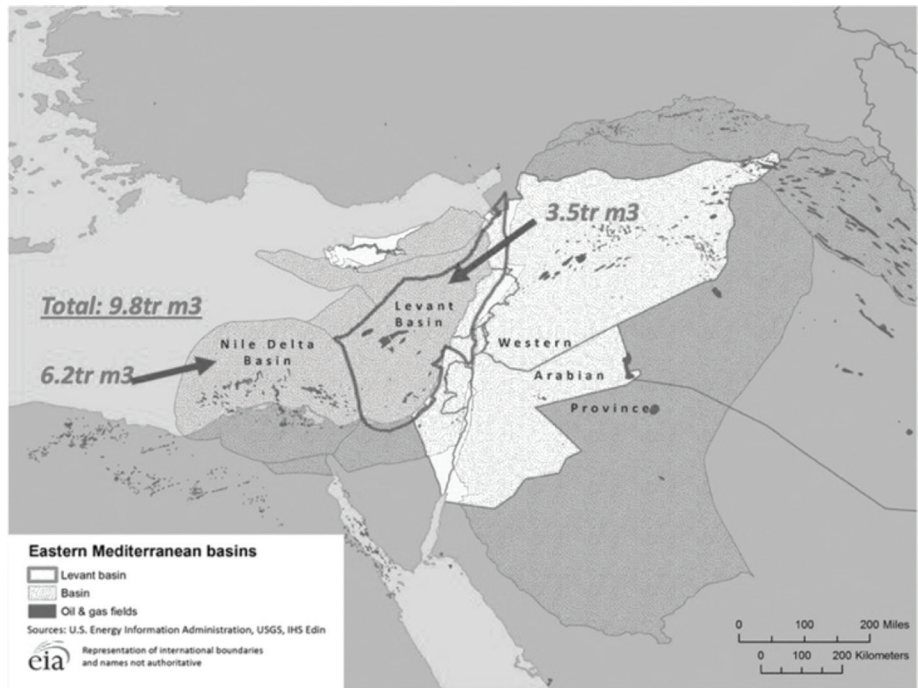
BACKGROUND

Located at the cross-roads of three continents, the eastern Mediterranean is home to intractable conflicts, civil strife, and armed hostilities on national, religious, and sectarian grounds. Located on opposite sides of the Aegean Sea, Turkey and Greece are NATO members that have had an uneasy relationship over an array of disputes since the 1950s, ranging from the Cyprus Issue and the extent of maritime zones to territorial rights and control over airspace. The bilateral relationship is fraught with a painful historical background that oversees conflicting narratives of nationalisms in public discourse. Both countries are considered to be “founding others” of one another, in reference to their respective roles as occupiers prior to gaining independence—Greece in 1829 and Turkey in 1923—and they define their self-conception as nation states in terms of the other by invoking memories of adversity cultivated during wars of independence. Cyprus remains the main outstanding issue that has continued to create a rift in bilateral relations since the 1950s. The island nation has been divided between Greece and Turkey since 1974, when a military coup led by an ultra-right wing Greek Cypriot armed group, EOKA-B, attempted to unite Cyprus with Greece and led to Turkey’s military intervention to protect the Turkish Cypriot population. However, more recently, the geopolitics of the region are of heightened importance primarily due to issues related to “maritime claims, access, and the quest for energy riches.”¹ Tensions have risen to critical levels since the summer of 2020 as Turkey and Greece both claimed sovereign rights to potential energy assets in the region and sent warships to patrol the waters.

GEOPOLITICS AND ENERGY SECURITY

Discovery of offshore hydrocarbons in the eastern Mediterranean in 2011 sparked tensions over the extent of EEZs and rights to energy deposits beneath the seabed (Figure 1), bringing two sides to the brink of an armed conflict and raising the stakes for NATO of maintaining cohesion in its southern flank. Turkey’s forward defense hard power doctrine, called “Blue Homeland,” aims to create a maritime security belt in its periphery. This doctrine adheres to defensive neorealism, but Turkey’s quest to increase its own security creates anxiety in Greece and therefore leaves Turkey less secure, creating a spiraling of arms race.²

Figure 1: Eastern Mediterranean Oil and Gas Fields³



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2013

Peace and Conflict under Neorealism

Neorealism emphasizes that the distribution of power among unitary, rational state actors is the key determinant of relative standing in international politics. In the anarchic world of ‘all against all,’ constraints imposed by the multipolar world order often make state behavior more predictable, due to a subsequently more stable balance in power dynamics and more

accurate assessment of risk factors. Turkey and Greece are rational and unitary actors that behave similarly under comparable conditions, despite the uncertainty posed by a shifting power-play of partnerships in the region. Both nations exhibit a quest for survival and security in this unpredictable environment but show no inherent desire for power maximization or risk of overstretching.⁴ For scholars of the defensive neorealist paradigm,

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the main argument states that the quest to maximize security against aggression leaves little further room for cooperation among states to realise potential shared gains in disputes over territory, status, and influence. Taking the self-interested state as the starting point, the distributive nature of Turkish-Greek maritime conflicts is particularly prone to create irreconcilable differences and reward zero-sum bargaining that lends little to no space for mutu-

ally beneficial arrangement. Further complicating the situation, UNCLOS contains legal gray areas that are widely open to interpretation in the case of the eastern Mediterranean, and the body lacks methods of enforcement for equitable resolution of disputes, which gives latitude to power politics above international institutions.

Turkey is an emerging country with aspirations to maximize its relative power to be secure in the region. However, Greece tries to maximize its gains and secure its periphery by staking major claims on maritime rights and applying a policy of containment on Turkey. The involvement of Cyprus adds an extra layer of complexity to their relationship and reveals competing interests for influence between Turkey and Greece to control access to high seas, energy routes, and trade in the Mediterranean. From a defensive neorealist's perspective, cooperation is the norm rather than the exception, yet each party engages in regional alliances against one another to serve their best self-interest.⁵ Recent tensions around energy exploration activities of the Turkish research vessel *Oruç Reis* to the east of nearby Greek islands demonstrate that avenues for cooperation between Greece and Turkey are either negligible or costly in comparison to pursuit of isolated national interests. For example, Turkey's courting of Russian support and partnerships with Libya, Qatar, and Azerbaijan are part of a power-balancing act against Greece's pursuit of support from the European Union (EU) and partnership with Egypt, Israel, and Greek Cyprus.⁶ Part

of the reason for this divergence in alliance formations is Turkey's disappointment with stagnation of its accession talks for EU membership and its perception of Greece as the main stumbling block towards this goal.

Regional Views of Turkey

The stability of the regional order suffers from diverging interests of multiple state actors with roughly equal powers, each vying for influence over one other. Status-quo states, such as France, Greece, Egypt, and Greek Cyprus, oppose power concentration in Turkey, due to fear of domination by Ankara, and have formed a balancing coalition against it.⁷ For example, France's heightened military presence in the region, defense cooperation with Greece, and frequent joint naval exercises that are intended to form a bulwark against Turkish activism demonstrate its conformity to the neorealist paradigm. Through this naval diplomacy, France aims to prevent the rise of a rival, or a potential regional hegemon, in Turkey. Paris takes a pessimistic approach and argues that Turkey is constantly revisionist, believing that its very survival hinges on pursuit of power maximization, and will not stop until hegemony is achieved.

The deterrence model in defensive neorealism posits that if conflicting parties engage in a contest of determination over who will blink first, they will both assume that their opponent is revisionist, due to uncertainty about other states' real intentions and tendency to prepare for the worst-case scenario. In accordance with the deterrence model, the allied powers of France, Greece, and Egypt have thus assumed that Turkey is a revisionist opponent, and out of fear of looking weak, prefer punishment to appeasement.⁸ Per defensive neorealism, this approach is based on Greece's understanding that "the only way to contain aggression and cope with hostility is to build up and intelligently manipulate sanctions, threats, and force,"⁹ and they certainly have done so against Turkey.

Furthermore, French leadership warns of "buck-passing," or the pitfall of conflict avoidance by failing to adequately balance a resurgent power, in the context of Turkey's rising power, and draws resemblance towards years leading up to World War II.¹⁰ This resemblance is meant to convey the dire consequences of hesitance and of the preference to let someone else bear the burden of dealing with a revisionist opponent, as was the case against Germany in mid-1930s. An influential former advisor to the President of France, Jacques Attali, has indicated how seriously his government takes the Turkish threat, going so far as to making a wholesale analogy between Erdoğan's Turkey and Hitler's Germany. Attali

explained, “We have to take Turkey very seriously, and be prepared to act by all means. If our predecessors had taken the Führer’s speeches seriously from 1933 to 1936, they could have prevented this monster from accumulating the means to do what he did.”¹¹ Attali, and the French government, clearly prefers to use power to pressure Turkey to relinquish its assertive posture and abandon its pursuit of greater security. The biggest risk with this unstable regional system is a miscalculation by one of the parties that may spark an armed conflict—perhaps even by accident, as Thucydides famously argues—and drag its allies in a “chain-ganging” manner into a confrontation, as in the case of World War I. This type of chain engagement arises from a particular alliance pattern in a multipolar world order, where members of any given pact are highly interdependent on each other to maintain the regional balance of power. To reduce risks in such a precarious situation, NATO could be a possible conduit for a dialogue between Turkey, Greece, and France since the alliance could make the behavior of both sides more predictable via its established deconfliction mechanisms.¹² However, the problems with NATO mediation might be twofold. First, the organization is not mandated to arbitrate disputes, so institutionally, it may be ill-equipped to do so. Second, member countries are losing faith in NATO’s ability to adapt to shifting geopolitical fault lines in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. French President Emmanuel Macron has already branded NATO as “brain-dead” to underline its obsolescence in a chaotic world of rising powers like Turkey, Russia, and China.¹³

Turkey’s View of the Region

These powerful regional partnerships, shifting alliances, and rivalries have a profound impact on Turkey’s sense of insecurity. To alleviate its security concerns, Turkey takes a more assertive geopolitical posture and resorts to coercive diplomacy to extend its maritime interests into places such as Qatar, Somalia, and Libya. Turkey has tried to create a defensive perimeter to deter the status-quo coalition from making an offensive move. Its maritime delimitation agreement with the UN-recognized government in Libya in 2019 (Figure 2) and intention to drill for offshore gas, regardless of the deleterious effect on Greek islands, stoked tensions not only in Athens but also in other European capitals, which

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perceive these actions as an offensive means to pursue security. Subsequent anxiety about Ankara’s military presence stretches as far as North Africa, the Caucasus, and the Persian Gulf, and unites status-quo states in the periphery under a common objective to limit Turkey’s expanding influence and to create a European *Pax Mediterranea*. Similarly, Greece’s demarcation of EEZs with Egypt in 2020 that overlap with the Turkey-Libya agreement created a backlash in Ankara and enflamed further tensions in the region (Figure 2).

Figure 2: EEZ Agreements between Turkey-Libya and Greece-Egypt¹⁴
 Vertical Red Dashed-Lines denote 26° and 28° East Longitudes (left to right)



Source: Deutsche Welle, 2020

Moreover, Turkey perceives the close proximity of militarized Greek islands to its western shores not only as an obstacle to its crucial maritime interests, but also as a threat that harbors an offensive capability to strike deep into the Turkish mainland. Greece is anxious that Turkey’s offensive

amphibious capabilities could neutralize the islands in a short period of time. Athens wants to preserve its asymmetric advantage by keeping these islands fortified, as a springboard for deterrence against potential Turkish military incursion. Greek policymakers realize that even if the other side “harbors no aggressive design, changes can be rapid, and there is nothing to guarantee security,”¹⁵ and therefore maintain the islands. The Greek government feels compelled to act by procuring arms, in case their worst fears are justified. To maintain an edge—especially in the air force—amid rising tensions with Turkey, Greece also signed a \$10-billion arms procurement deal with France in the “most ambitious military overhaul” for decades.¹⁶ Turkey, in turn, has invested heavily in its domestic defense industry and developed an impressive array of weapons in its arsenal since 2014, from armed drones to long-range smart munitions, and demonstrated its capabilities in theaters across Syria, Libya, and Azerbaijan.¹⁷

This overly zealous protection on both sides may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of hostilities, since “what one state regards as insurance, the adversary will see as encirclement.”¹⁸ If Turkey has a navy sufficient enough to safeguard its energy rights, it may also have the ability to keep Greece away from the eastern Mediterranean. Both states claim to abide by the status-quo but maintain aggressive military postures, which makes

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discerning each of their real intentions difficult. This vicious cycle of aggression begets fear, suspicion, and distrust, culminating in further hostilities.¹⁹ In seeking security through an arms race, both sides upset the sense of security in the other. This spiral constitutes the basis of the “security dilemma” between Turkey and Greece, a tragedy

of creating a menace that security measures were designed to ward off.²⁰ The incentive to cheat the other in pursuit of narrow self-interests, a classic prisoner’s dilemma outcome, leaves both sides worse in the end.

A WAY FORWARD?

Per defensive neorealists, this situation is a “doubly dangerous” scenario, whereby each side regards an offensive strategy as advantageous, and an offensive posture is indistinguishable from a defensive one due to misperceptions.²¹ Greece and Turkey see each other as a threat to the current equilibrium but fail to examine the implications of their own actions on

the other. In fact, to break the deadlock and to stop the race to the bottom, both sides should choose appeasement over punishment. States are interdependent for their survival under anarchy due to pervasive insecurity across the system, and stakes for gains and losses are higher than what they would otherwise be if each side existed in a vacuum. Since no one actor can read the other's mind, each side should reflect on the cognitive biases that may create unwarranted inferences about the other and refrain from giving each other "cause for legitimate offense."²² What one perceives as a mutually detrimental stalemate or a mutually enticing opportunity should not be dismissed by the other as irrelevant. Using alternative, back-door communication channels to signal important information about intentions—as was the case in Cuban Missile Crisis—rather than relying on personal intuition may go a long way to increase the "accuracy of each side's perception of the other" and diffuse tensions in the region.²³

Understanding sensitivities on each side, analyzing which policies threaten "some of the other's values," and developing common interests in trade, tourism, and economic growth should be a shared goal between Greece and Turkey.²⁴ This suggested responsibility to cooperate goes against the prevalent self-defeating, populist rhetoric that has stoked nationalist fervor against one side or the other. Yet, if both sides desire security rather than power maximization, then it may be possible to find a compromise on maritime zones. If not, and one or both parties are revisionist, then increasing security of one side would inevitably be perceived as aggression by the other in the anarchic context of international relations.²⁵ Neither side is able to retreat currently without political cost or press its challenges to the point of war without risking the collapse of NATO and possible punishment by the United States. It would be wise to start from a position of reciprocal gestures and create a Joint Development Area (JDA) to partly satisfy the EEZ claims of both parties in the Mediterranean. From there, solving other issues—such as maritime zones in the Aegean Sea—may be able to progress, breaking the two countries out of the "prisoners dilemma" and forging greater cooperation in the future. *f*

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