



How to respond to Erdogan

COMMENTARY | BY GEORGE PAGOULATOS *

How do you deal with an expansionist neighbor who feels uncomfortable in his Western suit, cramped within his existing borders? First, you need to “read” him correctly. Today’s Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan considers itself a “central state,” a regional or even international power, a member of the G20. A country whose size allows it to maintain opportunistic “transactional” relations, to coordinate or clash with Russia, to instrumentalize NATO. A country which until recently claimed the moral capital of “soft power” by providing shelter to over 3.5 million refugees **and** preventing them from crossing into Europe. In exchange **for** this service, it has demanded money, easier access to the **European** market **and** the easier movement of Turkish citizens.

The conversion of Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque constitutes a turning point **and** at the same time the culmination of hubris. President Erdogan prefers to turn Turkey into a global beacon of Sunni Islam rather than maintain the appearance of a Western-oriented secular state. He feels squeezed by the Lausanne Treaty status quo **and** seeks to bury Kemalism under his neo-Ottoman Turkey.

The decision on Hagia Sophia was as much a product of revisionism as of the acute domestic weakening of Erdogan. His brazen display of power is driven by a mixture of arrogance **and** despair, aiming at a domestic popularity boost to compensate **for** his declining polls due to military losses **and** the acute economic crisis. But being cornered makes a leader even more unpredictable **and** dangerous.

How do we react to a regime that conducts military operations at home **and** abroad, in Syria, Iraq **and** Libya? That intervenes by strengthening subversive forces in Arab countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia **and** the United Arab Emirates?

The core of the reaction is, of course, defensive fortification, readiness of our armed forces, deterrence. Maximizing the cost of a hot confrontation **for** our hot-headed neighbor. Without war



Turkish President Erdogan attends a wreath-laying ceremony at the Ataturk mausoleum, in Ankara, yesterday.

cries, with composure, self-control **and** determination. If the opposite side offers you the barrel of the gun, it is not **for** you to put a carnation in it.

Our critical deterrence capability lies in diplomacy. We are a country anchored to NATO **and** the **European** Union, the strongest union of developed states in the world. Is that enough to secure us? Unfortunately, no. The EU Common **Foreign and Security Policy** (CFSP) is not truly common. Each country carries its own preferences, atavisms **and** dependencies. Even on a relatively secondary issue such as Libya, Europe has been divided. Greece is not without blame **for** the lack of a sufficiently integrated common **European foreign policy**. **For** decades we diverged over our bilateral dispute with North Macedonia – fortunately settled now, so we no longer have to waste precious diplomatic resources.

The response to this particular Eastern neighbor is not to become like him, but instead to show how different we are. Our relationship with the EU is not the transactional relationship that Erdogan has with his occasional allies. We are not a regime sliding to authoritarianism, in a state of war, drawing on vast reservoirs of a consumable population **for** waging wars. To each their own.

What’s more, the escalation of Turkish revisionism **and** provocative

actions coincides with the EU’s graduation into a geopolitical mindset **and** Germany’s unprecedented diplomatic activation – France already has a long tradition in that respect. The first big test will be during the German Presidency of the EU, which of course seeks stability **and** calm waters.

If the pandemic was the accelerator of EU fiscal integration, the Turkish challenge **and** the vacuum created by the absence of the United States under President Donald Trump are mobilizing a more dynamic **European foreign policy**, now driven not only by Paris but also by Berlin.

But there are clear limits to how far the **European** Union can go. The CFSP is subject to unanimity. Article 42 of the EU Treaty refers mainly to joint military missions outside the EU. Only in the final paragraph 7 is the principle of mutual “aid **and** assistance” (mutual defense clause) introduced, in the event of an armed attack on a member-state. The provision has not been implemented. Economic **and** diplomatic sanctions remain Europe’s main instrument – **and** France is the only reliable military power. The CFSP’s future lies in an enhanced cooperation of a core of countries around France **and** Germany, in which Greece aspires to be part. This, however, takes time **and** time is running out.

What remains is the power derived from legality **and** Greece’s commitment to international law. This means readiness to discuss with Turkey, but not under threat, **and** to defend Greece’s interests by resorting to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. As they say in the Middle East, no one will fight your war. **And** as remains the case in Europe, no one will settle your disputes on your behalf.

* George Pagoulatos is professor of **European** politics **and** economy at the Athens University of Economics **and** Business, visiting professor at the College of Europe in Bruges, **and** director general of the **Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)**.