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the logic of mutual benefit with emphasis on the environmental dimension

SECURITY & FOREIGN POLICY

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June 2023

Policy Paper #139/2023

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Summary

- The ongoing antagonism and lack of closure in Greek-Turkish relations has come to seem like the natural state of affairs between Greece and Turkey.
- Turkey has mounted a number of challenges to various aspects of Greek sovereignty, sometimes backed up by verbal threats, while Greece persists in making maximalist claims of doubtful legality to zones of sovereignty. With regard to the Cyprus conundrum, valuable diplomatic capital has been wasted since the accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the European Union in 2004.
- At the same time, the two countries face common threats to biodiversity and fishery activities, as well as climate security challenges and environmental degradation, that can only be addressed by joint trans-boundary action. In the face of the daunting climate-related challenges that are expected to hit the Eastern Mediterranean especially hard, cooperation is not a matter of choice but of necessity and survival.
- In Greece, what is needed is a long overdue and fruitful discussion on the various issues that have traumatized Greek-Turkish relations. The essential prerequisite for any substantial dialogue is the setting aside of everything that has poisoned their bilateral relations, everything that has threatened peace and security, rendering their use of natural resources ineffective and imperilling the well-being of their citizens.

The backdrop

The prevalent attitude on both sides of the Aegean is that “our side” is right, just and compliant with international law, and the other side is intransigent and aggressive. This overall line has led to utter impasse. “National correctness” imposes predetermined viewpoints that reject and demonize any alternative view.

Some of the “certainties” propagated by Greece as well as by Turkey are hard to substantiate on the basis of existing international law and practice. However, neither the Greek nor the Turkish public are in a position to question the various “certainties” with which they have been conditioned for decades by sequential governments and by the, often irresponsible, Mass Media.

Recent decades have seen successive attempts to resolve the outstanding Greek-Turkish differences end in failure, to the extent that the lack of settlement and ongoing antagonism seem inevitable and the natural state of affairs between Greece and Turkey. The prevalent attitude on both sides of the Aegean is that “our side” is right, just and compliant with international law, and the other side is intransigent and aggressive. This overall line has led to utter impasse. “National correctness” imposes predetermined viewpoints that reject and demonize any alternative view. As far as Greece is concerned, the ostensible evocation of “national rights” on the part of self-proclaimed defenders of “the national truth” can have only negative consequences.

The cultivation of fear and anguish, the dissemination of erroneous and selective information (often out of context), the predominance of misperceived assessments and the preservation of various national myths in both countries have derailed every attempt at meaningful dialogue that could lead to two nations settling their differences on the basis of mutual benefit (a “positive-sum outcome”). Self-righteousness feeds national insecurity, which justifies huge arsenals which cripple the economy and undermine the necessary well-being and prosperity of both peoples.

A number of issues seem unsolvable, but this really is not the case.

Over recent decades, Turkey has mounted a number of challenges to various aspects of Greek sovereignty, sometimes with verbal threats, while for its part Greece has insisted on maximalist claims to zones of sovereignty that are of doubtful legality (e.g. to Greek national airspace four miles beyond its territorial sea, or to unilaterally delimit the Exclusive Economic Zone in the Aegean Sea, despite the limited distance between the Greek and Turkish coastlines).

However, things are not as depicted by both sides. It is worth highlighting two categories of irrational convictions held by both parties: the challenges regarding the consolidated acquisitions and legitimate rights of each party, and the declaration of sovereign rights on the basis of what are often very tenuous grounds. Some of the “certainties” propagated by Greece as well as by Turkey are hard to substantiate on the basis of existing international law and practice. However, neither the Greek nor the Turkish public are in a position to question the various “certainties” with which they have been conditioned for decades by sequential governments and by the, often irresponsible, Mass Media. As a result, they have unrealistic expectations regarding a peaceful settlement and are convinced that they are entitled to the lion’s share in the Aegean region and beyond.

Before we proceed further in search of an alternative approach, we must first refer briefly to the Cyprus problem.

As regards the Cyprus conundrum, valuable diplomatic capital has been wasted since the accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the European Union in 2004. The prerequisites for dialogue have to be discussed in depth, and above all the prospect of real coexistence based on equality between the two communities on the island. Otherwise, if no renewed talks take place, the situation will grow worse by the day and lead to the definitive partition of Cyprus, thereby sanctioning the results of the 1974 Turkish military intervention. In this regard, better Greek-Turkish relations are essential for the initiation of a new peace process that will receive the committed support of the two “motherlands”. The two sides should begin a new dialogue determined to avoid the mistakes that led to

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The threats to biodiversity and fishery activities, the climate security challenges and environmental degradation, can only be addressed by joint trans-boundary action. In the light of the daunting challenges that are expected to hit the Eastern Mediterranean as a result of ongoing climate change, cooperation is a matter not of choice, but of necessity and survival.

the Cran Montana fiasco, and following the gist of the talks held in 2008-2010 and, especially, those of 2015-2016 (it is generally acknowledged that these latter negotiations almost clinched an overall settlement at the end of 2016, while the same result appeared possible momentarily at the Cran Montana meeting headed by the UN Secretary-General).

The need for an alternate viewpoint

If various phenomena are understood in their true dimensions, it points to the need for bilateral cooperation in various fields (or, in the case of complex international issues, for either bilateral negotiations or recourse to mediation or international adjudication). Only thus can the two nations' existing differences be settled, leaving them in a position to preserve and exploit their common resources. To take an example, however trivial it may seem the Aegean can only be effectively rid of plastic waste by a common Greek-Turkish effort. The threats to biodiversity and fishery activities, the climate security challenges and environmental degradation, can only be addressed by joint trans-boundary action. In the light of the daunting challenges that are expected to hit the Eastern Mediterranean as a result of ongoing climate change, cooperation is a matter not of choice, but of necessity and survival.

In Greece, what is required is a long-overdue and fruitful discussion on the various issues that have traumatized Greek-Turkish relations. The essential prerequisite for any meaningful dialogue is the setting aside of everything that has poisoned their bilateral relations, everything that has threatened peace and security, rendering their use of natural resources ineffective and imperiling the well-being of their citizens.

In the case of Greece, such an approach should also inevitably address the "sacred domain" of Greek "national issues".¹ The goal here is to arrive at mutually acceptable solutions, following a sincere and open dialogue with Turkey on the following issues engaged in from a positive-sum perspective, which is to say the outcome produces two winners, two satisfied parties:²

The final delimitation of the maritime boundaries (territorial sea).

The delimitation of the zones of rights of exploitation (continental shelf, Exclusive Economic Zone).

The final delimitation of Greece's national airspace with the ultimate goal of ending once and for all the virtual dogfights over the Aegean that have cost human lives and which entail huge economic cost.

Furthermore, it is essential that the various unilateral claims are ended once and for all and the following are rethought from scratch:

Environmental policies, especially with regard to the Aegean Sea.

¹ Alexis Heraclides, *Ethnika themata kai ethnokentrismos: Mia kritiki stin elliniki exoteriki politiki* [National Issues and Ethnocentrism: A critique of Greek Foreign Policy] (Athens: I. Sideris, 2018).

² Alexis Heraclides, *The Greek-Turkish Conflict in the Aegean: Imagined Enemies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 2010), pp. 167-230; and Alexis Heraclides, 'The Unresolved Aegean Dispute: Problems and Prospects', in Alexis Heraclides and Gizem Alioğlu Çakmak (eds), *Greece and Turkey in Conflict and Cooperation: From Europeanization to De-Europeanization* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp.89-103.

Energy policies, with cooperation wherever possible in this regard (renewable sources of energy) and a dialogue on the utility of hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation in a semi-closed sea

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The alignment of their respective policies on minorities on the basis of the European standards that have been in place since 1989 (the respect for minority rights, as this was established by the Council of Europe and the OSCE).

Coordination and understanding, with a focus on a more humane handling of the refugee and migrant issues that involve so many human beings and so much suffering.

All types of collaboration, whether explicit or implicit, multiply benefits for both Greece and Turkey, primarily in common security and regional stability, but also in economic terms.

The 2023 earthquakes in Turkey caused immense suffering in that country, but also a popular solidarity between Greece and Turkey which has already led to the easing of the tensions we have experienced in recent years. There is a precedent: both countries experienced earthquakes in 1999, which led to a decade of friendly relations between Greece and Turkey though not to the resolution of their long-standing disputes.³ However, the recent earthquakes may present an opportunity for a reconciliation that also includes a thorough resolution of the several unresolved differences between the two countries, and most notably their multifaceted Aegean dispute.

The serious economic consequences of the natural disaster have brought new realities into being that could function as stepping stones to a new era and to a number of long overdue initiatives.

The serious economic consequences of the natural disaster have brought new realities into being that could function as stepping stones to a new era and to a number of long overdue initiatives. One of these could be a moratorium on the two nations' huge armaments programs, presumably on those aimed at the other party as a deterrent. The funds saved could be invested, in Turkey's case, in the rebuilding of Southeast Turkey along the lines of a *Green Economic Model* that will benefit not only Turkey, but the entire Eastern Mediterranean region.

In the case of Greece, a moratorium on armament projects would release funds for the consolidation of its economy, which remains afloat due to debt-relief measures: the so-called grace period (through to 2032) granted to Greece by its creditors in exchange for its commitment to maintain a primary surplus (a national government budget surplus excluding interest payments on its outstanding debt) of 2.2 percent of GDP on average in 2023-2060.⁴ The deal thus expects Greece's gross financial needs to remain below 15 percent of GDP in the medium term and below 20 percent of GDP thereafter. In the meantime, Greece has to make its finances sustainable and catch up with reforms and improvements to the infrastructure, pension system, transport, health and educational system which have been neglected over the last fifteen years due to the successive crises. Apparently, southeast Turkey is one of the most polluted areas in the Eastern Mediterranean region, due to the many factories that have opened there in order to exploit the cheap labor of Syrian migrants. The need to reconstruct this region could be a golden opportunity to reestablish the economy on a new and more ecologically-friendly basis.

³ Panayotis Tsakonas, *The Incomplete Breakthrough in Greek-Turkish Relations. Grasping Greece's Socialization Strategy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 2010), pp. 72-78.

⁴ In recent years, Greece has purchased the Rafale fighter aircraft, missile systems, corvettes and the electronics and weapons systems that come with them. All of these are quite expensive. It is also poised to acquire the advanced F-35 aircraft, starting in 2029. At a time in which Greece is still struggling to heal the economic and social wounds left by the recent financial and economic crisis, the worst in its history, these new purchases are estimated to cost aggravatingly in excess of 20 billion euros.

The crucial environmental dimension

Both nations have to brace to survive the impact of a common, merciless enemy: climate change.

The Mediterranean is regarded by international organizations and climate experts as a climate change “hotspot”, which is to say a region that is expected to face wide-ranging and long-lasting environmental reverberations.

As most of the hydrocarbon exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean is focused on natural gas, it is worth pointing out that the release of natural gas into the sea can have severe environmental consequences. [...] the overall economic utility of extracting hydrocarbons in Greece is questionable.

Greece will also have to invest money in re-transforming its economy, if it is to meet the European standard of zero carbon emissions by 2050; doing so will also enhance its energy security and satisfy the increased energy needs caused by the departure from lignite, the main domestic energy source in Greece until now.

Both nations have to brace to survive the impact of a common, merciless enemy: climate change. Both live in a region which is already experiencing several disconcerting phenomena relating to a changing climate: unprecedented wildfires, with extreme heatwaves triggering mega-fires and releasing high levels of carbon dioxide, further exacerbating global warming. Climate models show climate changing faster than the global average in the Mediterranean Basin, due to anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases. The Mediterranean is regarded by international organizations and climate experts as a climate change “hotspot”, which is to say a region that is expected to face wide-ranging and long-lasting environmental reverberations.

The region is expected to remain among the regions most negatively affected by climate change, particularly when it comes to precipitation and the hydrological cycle. Temperatures are rising 20% faster than the global average, and this is already having real and serious consequences.⁵ Against this backdrop, the two countries’ insistence on exploring and drilling for hydrocarbons comes across as a mistaken and obsolete undertaking, entailing geopolitical competition to secure control of fossil fuels rather than a prioritizing of the fight against the common environmental and climate threat.

In 2019, the Greek New Democracy Government made public its intension to reverse the energy production model, hitherto dominated by lignite, and put hydrocarbon exploration on ice, in order to pursue a new, ambitious environmental policy aimed at increasing the proportion of total demand represented by renewable energy resources to 35% by 2030.

But due to the recent energy crisis (a result of Russia’s criminal aggression against Ukraine), the Greek Government decided to extend the lifetime of the lignite-fired power plants that were to have been taken off the grid in 2023 to 2025. The decision taken in November 2022 to power a 660 MW power plant that was to have run on natural gas with lignite should be re-examined, now that the energy crisis has subsided somewhat.

Furthermore Greece decided to promote plans for the exploration and exploitation of natural gas and oil resources. Turkey, too, has been fostering the exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, violating Cyprus’s Exclusive Economic Zone in some cases.

As most of the hydrocarbon exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean is focused on natural gas, it is worth pointing out that the release of natural gas into the sea can have severe environmental consequences. Although some of the natural gas evaporates, a significant portion dissolves into the water and is highly toxic to marine life, especially when this happens near the shore, in shallow waters or areas with slow water circulation, as is the case in the Mediterranean. Gas leaks from pipes can cause considerable environmental danger in terms of groundwater, but also on the surface. Burning and

⁵ United Nations, Intergovernmental panel on climate change 2021 full report. Final Government Distribution, chapter 12, pp.67-70, 2021. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report>

consuming natural gas may be more environmentally friendly than other fossil fuels, because it emits less carbon dioxide than regular oil or coal-fired power plants, but gas emissions should not be overlooked; gas combustion also releases methane and lowers air quality⁶. In addition, the building of a nuclear power plant in Turkey in a seismically active area is also worrying.

Greece and Turkey joining forces to tackle shared environmental threats is nothing short of a matter of life and death. Both countries should adopt a new energy and co-existence paradigm both in the Aegean Sea and the wider Eastern Mediterranean.

Furthermore, the overall economic utility of extracting hydrocarbons in Greece is questionable. Costs associated with oil and gas extraction may lead to economic losses, since the overwhelming majority of tourism and recreational activities that would be directly impacted by an oil spill or gas leak take place on or near the coast. The semi-closed nature of the Mediterranean, the strong clientelistic character of the Greek political system and the risk of environmental degradation in a country whose tourism industry accounts for some 20% of its GDP calls into question the overall utility of hydrocarbon development, despite legal guarantees and the prior experience in the Prinos fields. After all, production in Prinos began in 1980, when mankind was far less aware of the repercussions of oil and gas on the climate and there were essentially no alternatives to hydrocarbons; of course, today, renewables are a viable alternative, and both Greece and Turkey are well positioned to develop these energy sources (solar, wind, water etc.).⁷

In this context, Greece and Turkey joining forces to tackle shared environmental threats is nothing short of a matter of life and death. Both countries should adopt a new energy and co-existence paradigm both in the Aegean Sea and the wider Eastern Mediterranean. The new “energy paradigm” would entail different political interests and social formations interacting in a new and different way with technological change. Putting the climate crisis at the heart of national security analysis is a key step towards anticipating its impacts on the physical environment, but also on the economy and the geopolitical landscape. The interests of the two countries will be best served if a joint management or condominium arrangement is established in some areas of the Aegean.⁸

The two countries are situated along the routes these people will take when, driven by hunger, war or devastating environmental degradation, they seek a better future in Europe.

Disasters are not the only threats the climate change poses to Greece and Turkey. In the Middle East, Russia, Central Asia and Iran, temperatures are much higher than usual, threatening densely-populated areas in particular. Since more and more regions are struggling to maintain their farming and economies, hunger and war will drive huge numbers of people to seek a new life elsewhere, in countries where citizens are already struggling with high prices and insecurity. The two countries are situated along the routes these people will take when, driven by hunger, war or devastating environmental degradation, they seek a better future in Europe.⁹ Immigration is already one of the most polarising policy issues in Europe, and has revitalised the discussion on possibly fortifying the states of Europe against the mass waves of the impoverished and destitute. Given that both Turkey and Greece are located at the EU’s most sensitive external border, if they and their Balkan neighbours may decide to close their borders to refugees and migrants, as happened in 2015, the two countries will be left alone to address a problem in the face of which humanity is increasingly receding into barbarism.

⁶ Net Group. Natural gas environmental impact: problems and benefits, 2021. Retrieved from <https://group.met.com/en>

⁷ Andreas Stergiou, ‘Socioeconomic and Environmental Impact of Exploitation of Hydrocarbons in Maritime Areas: The Case of Greece’, *Resour Environ Econ*, 2022, 4(1), pp. 333-342. <https://doi.org/10.25082/REE.2022.01.006>

⁸ Andreas Stergiou, *The Greek-Turkish Maritime Dispute: Resisting the Future* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), pp.85-118.

⁹ Andreas Stergiou, “Eastern Mediterranean Energy Geopolitics Revisited: Green Economy instead of Conflict”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 24(4) (2023), pp. 604-625.

Concluding remark

By way of a conclusion, the two neighbours, Turkey and Greece, are facing a number of enormous and urgent problems, especially in the environmental sphere. They can only confront these issues, and deal with them effectively, if they do so in concert, through constructive cooperation and, as far as possible, joint decisions. Such 'superordinate goals' (meaning vital aims that have to be undertaken but cannot be achieved by one party on its own) may lead, as Muzafer Sherif, the leading Turkish-American social psychologist has argued, to an improvement in relations between the two former antagonists. We can only hope that, this time round, this will pave the way for the sort of genuine reconciliation that proved elusive in 1999-2010.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Heraclides, *The Greek-Turkish Conflict in the Aegean*, 175.