



# Quiet German diplomacy

COMMENTARY | BY RONALD MEINARDUS\*

Germany's government is keeping a close eye on the evolving developments on the Greek-Turkish relations front. "We welcome the talks between the Greek and Turkish sides," reads an official statement issued just a few hours after the meeting of the foreign ministers of Greece and Turkey in Ankara in early September. The text then says that "the German government has worked intensively for such a dialogue and encouraged both sides to do so." The message is clear: For Berlin, the current easing of tensions in Greek-Turkish relations is also a success of German diplomacy.

This assessment is not unfounded: For years, Berlin has consistently – and discreetly – advocated a political settlement between Athens and Ankara. Germany's diplomatic involvement reached a high point in 2020, when tensions over disputed maritime zones in the Eastern Mediterranean almost spiraled out of control. The situation calmed down not least because of a forceful political intervention by then-Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Also, under German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, preventing an escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, or, to put it positively, a lasting defusing of tensions between Ankara and Athens, remains a major goal of German foreign policy.

Berlin's intervention to this end was effective last December when, on a German initiative – and under the cover of secrecy – senior officials from Athens and Ankara met in Brussels and agreed to resume their frozen dialogue. Berlin made a major contribution to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan leaving behind the policy of non-communication – also dubbed "Mitsotakis yok" (Mitsotakis no) – and Athens and Ankara getting back to talking.

For an appraisal of Germany's role, it is important that it doesn't aim to influence the substance of the negotiations. It's about procedure, not substance: Berlin's goal is for both sides to sit down at the negotiating table and work together to find mutually agreeable solutions. "We do not take legal positions, we are not arbitrators," says a diplomat in Berlin. "Therefore, there can be no German



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (left) and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis talk to the media during a press conference after a meeting at Maximos Mansion in Athens, on October 27, 2022.

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stance. The parties have to come to an agreement."

This neutrality, which critics in Greece denounce as a "policy of equal distances," is a prerequisite for successful mediation. "If we tell the Turks that 'you are in the wrong,' you achieve exactly the opposite in Ankara and aggravate the conflict," adds the diplomat.

Alongside neutrality, discretion is a second principle of German mediation. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that very little is made public about Germany's role in Greek-Turkish affairs. At no time has the German government publicly stated what the details of a solution to the Turkish-Greek differences should look like.

Nevertheless, off the record, German diplomats have said that a solu-

tion through arbitration, preferably by the International Court of Justice in The Hague, would be the best solution. "We think the approach is good that both sides are talking about which issues to take to the International Court of Justice," says another German diplomat in a confidential conversation.

As Europe's leading economic power, Germany has traditionally been interested in stable conditions. Southeastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean are of strategic importance for Germany. With the war in Ukraine, this importance has increased. "We feel obliged to ensure a good relationship between the parties involved in the Aegean and are always partners in this," said German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in mid-July, adding, "We will remain so."

Policy makers in Berlin are aware that a quick solution to the Greek-Turkish differences is not to be expected. "It may take decades," says my interlocutor at the Foreign Ministry. "In the meantime, we have to make sure they don't shoot at each other."

\* Dr Ronald Meinardus is a senior research fellow and the coordinator of research projects on Greek-German relations at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP).