



Greek-Turkish dossier:

From the Blue Homeland to the High-Level Cooperation Council

SECURITY & FOREIGN POLICY

**Alexandros DIAKOPOULOS; Konstantinos FILIS;
Kostas IFANTIS & Petros LIAKOURAS**



November 2023
Insights #1/2023

Greek-Turkish file:

From the Blue Homeland to the High-Level Cooperation Council

Copyright © 2023 | All Rights Reserved

HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY (ELIAMEP)

49, Vasilissis Sofias Ave., 10676, Athens, Greece

Tel.: +30 210 7257 110 | Fax: +30 210 7257 114 | www.eliamep.gr | eliamep@eliamep.gr

ELIAMEP encourages open, pluralistic dialogue based on arguments and facts. The views expressed by associates of ELIAMEP are entirely their own and are not binding on the Institution.

Note: *In the present paper we have collected three analyses entitled: Behind Turkey's 'Blue Homeland' doctrine" (18.06.2023), Weighing the facts on the road to The Hague (30.07.2023) and Who benefits from Greek-Turkish relations deadlock? (10.09.2023) co-written by the four authors and published in the newspaper 'Kathimerini'.*

Cover photo: Shutterstock

Alexandros DIAKOPOULOS

Vice Admiral (Retd) Navy, Honorary Commandant of the Hellenic Navy, former National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister, Special Advisor to ELIAMEP

Konstantinos FILIS

Director, Institute of Global Affairs and Associate Professor, American College of Greece

Kostas IFANTIS

Professor of International Relations and Director of IDIS, Panteion University

Petros LIAKOURAS

Professor of International Law, Director of the Postgraduate Programme "International and European Studies", University of Piraeus

Summary

- Technical developments that have made it possible to drill for oil at sea, the discovery and exploitation of the Prinos oil field in the Aegean, and the UN process for drafting the Convention on the Law of the Sea have sounded the alarm for Turkish political-military elites.

Behind Turkey's 'Blue Homeland' doctrine"

- The "Blue Homeland" doctrine has become the cornerstone of Turkish regional activism/revisionism.
- Turkey no longer sees itself as a state on the periphery (of the Western world), but as the epicenter of a large and crucial geopolitical system. The "Blue Homeland" ideology integrates Turkish claims made over time together into an all-embracing plan, and serves to promote the neo-Ottoman agenda.
- The Blue Homeland's vision is transcontinental, if not global. It is about bringing about the resurgence of modern Turkey in the broader geographical areas where the Ottoman Empire was historically dominant or influential.
- The historical foundation of the doctrine is the view that, if Turkey is to regain its rightful place, it must first acquire sea power.
- The main obstacle to its doing so are the sovereign rights of Greece and Cyprus, which is why Turkey has begun by opposing them with every means at its disposal.
- Experience has shown that various novel theories embraced by Turkey—"gray zones", for instance—have become entrenched and increasingly hard-line over time.
- The stakes for Greece are existential, because Turkey's actions are directed against its vital interests. They have the potential to cut Greece off from the Eastern Mediterranean, to deny it any rights to maritime zones east of the 25th meridian, and to effectively place the Greek islands under Turkey's maritime jurisdiction. The "Blue Homeland" doctrine contains within it, provides ideological justification for, and updates the casus belli concept.
- Turkey is under the obligation to negotiate the delimitation either by mutual agreement or judicial settlement. The International Court of Justice has stressed that where coastal projections overlap, unilateral delimitations in the exercise of sovereign rights are not permitted. The filing of coordinates or maps does not constitute a substantive title of demarcation, nor does it have inherent legal force; it merely demonstrates the claims and their scope as understood by each of the state parties.
-

The development of the technical capacity for drilling for oil at sea, the discovery and exploitation of the Prinos field in the Aegean Sea and the United Nations process of drafting the Convention on the Law of the Sea mobilized Turkey's political and military elites.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become the main, but not the only, exponent of the "Blue Homeland" and the concept is considered the foundation of Turkish regional activism, influencing Turkish military, political and economic elites, as well as a large part of the academic ones.

MARITIME SPACE IS A KEY ELEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY'S GEOPOLITICAL DOCTRINE. However, the sea was never among the critical strategic priorities of the late Ottoman Empire nor of early Kemalist Turkey. Thus, despite the definitive loss of the Aegean islands enshrined in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the treaty itself was initially perceived and treated in Turkey as a success and promoted domestically as such. This was also due to a significant extent to the Turkish nation's historical identity as a land-based one. Even the nomadic character of the early Ottomans evolved into a settled farming/livestock-farming one and the pursuit of maritime dominance, mainly through Muslim pirates, was short-lived and was halted in 1571 by the Naval Battle of Lepanto (Nafpaktos).

From the beginning of the 1970s, however, this began to change. The development of the technical capacity for drilling for oil at sea, the discovery and exploitation of the Prinos field in the Aegean Sea and the United Nations process of drafting the Convention on the Law of the Sea mobilized Turkey's political and military elites. Suddenly, Turkey claimed to be "suffocating" by the proximity to its shores of the Eastern Aegean islands and the Dodecanese under Greek sovereignty. Since then, Turkish strategy toward Greece has focused on "breaking the encirclement" and laying claim to half of the Aegean Sea.

The "Blue Homeland" is projected as a springboard for geopolitical claims and has quickly become extremely popular among the ranks of the Turkish Armed Forces. Senior officers of the Turkish Navy adopted and used the term "Blue Homeland" in 2006 to denote the need for Turkey to claim and defend a wide exclusive economic zone (EEZ), a priori challenging Greek sovereignty and Greek and Cypriot sovereign rights in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, the jurisdiction of the international judicial bodies and thus the possibility of a judicial resolution of the Greek-Turkish dispute is rejected in principle.

It took more than a decade for "Blue Homeland" to be enshrined as a theoretical framework with strategic dimensions in the operational context of a major naval exercise. The Mavi Vatan 2019 exercise took place in the Black Sea, the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean in an impressive display of the Turkish Navy's operational capabilities. Since then, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become the main, but not the only, exponent of the "Blue Homeland" and the concept is considered the foundation of Turkish regional activism, influencing Turkish military, political and economic elites, as well as a large part of the academic ones. Moreover, an extremely effective platform for the Turkish president that allows him to consolidate his alliance with the nationalist far-right at home and box in the opposition into a debate from which only he benefits politically as it leaves no room for questioning his "vision" of a "New Turkey." Erdogan thus becomes the "patriot-in-chief" in a patriotic nation.

The 'Turkish Century'

The "Blue Homeland" ideology constitutes the integration into a holistic plan of Turkish claims on land and sea and is part of the promotion of Erdogan's neo-Ottoman, that is, neo-imperial, agenda. It is about orchestrating modern Turkey's return to the wider geographical areas where the Ottoman Empire historically influenced and dominated or upon which it claimed hegemony. The "Blue Homeland" is already being outflanked by the "Turkish Century" which is the magnifying glass of Turkish nationalism. It is well-known that Erdogan turned Kemalism's traditional focus from, mainly, Europe (especially during the Cold War) toward the Muslim world, but also Asia, culturally, geopolitically, even economically.

The “Blue Homeland” ideology constitutes the integration into a holistic plan of Turkish claims on land and sea and is part of the promotion of Erdogan’s neo-Ottoman, that is, neo-imperial, agenda. It is about orchestrating modern Turkey’s return to the wider geographical areas where the Ottoman Empire historically influenced and dominated or upon which it claimed hegemony.

The historical foundation of the doctrine is the position that, for Turkey to regain its deserved status, it must acquire sea power. The main obstacle to its implementation are the sovereign rights of Greece and Cyprus, which is why it is initially directed entirely against them.

In the Erdogan era, especially from 2013 onward, his country’s strategy acquired a “Eurasian” tone. Turkey no longer saw itself as on the periphery of the Western world but at the center of a large and critical geopolitical system. It was not enough for it to be a regional power; it wanted to impose itself as an inter-regional great power. Former prime minister and foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu, with his well-known concept of “strategic depth,” attributed the decline of the Ottoman Empire to the loss of control of the seas and pointed out that for this reason Turkey should ensure a continuous and active presence of a military and commercial fleet from the Black Sea to the Red Sea; he later extended this presence to the Indian Ocean. He had proclaimed, in fact, that the Turkish governments which during the Second World War had left the islands of the eastern Aegean to the Greeks were unforgivable.

Davutoglu saw Anatolia as a hub connecting Europe, Africa and Asia. The Eastern Mediterranean plays a similar role in the “Blue Homeland,” as it connects the Mediterranean basin, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific region. Although outside observers initially saw “Blue Homeland” as the expression of Turkish claims to energy reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, the vision is transcontinental, if not global. Exploitation of natural resources is only one aspect of the plan, the ultimate goal of which is to control the eastern sea transit routes to Europe. The historical foundation of the doctrine is the position that, for Turkey to regain its deserved status, it must acquire sea power. The main obstacle to its implementation are the sovereign rights of Greece and Cyprus, which is why it is initially directed entirely against them.

The operational dimension

In addition to its theoretical dimension, the “Blue Homeland” is also meaningful at the operational level. Turkey, in addition to claiming a huge EEZ, envisions the interconnection with the geopolitical spaces outside the Eastern Mediterranean. So it has military facilities and presence in Qatar, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Iraq and of course there are the occupation troops in Cyprus. In the past 10 years it has acquired and used its own research vessels and drilling rigs without needing the technology and capabilities of third parties. Most important, however, is the ongoing shipbuilding program of the Turkish Navy that aims to meet the needs of the doctrine with national means and resources. More than 15 modern units will join the Turkish Navy by 2027, in addition to German-made submarines, the Anadolu helicopter carrier (which played such a prominent role in Erdogan’s re-election campaign) and naval joint action aircraft. Turkey, in short, is modernizing its navy and building naval power projection capabilities. Alfred Mahan, the famed US naval strategist of the late 19th century, is becoming relevant again.

Turkish analysts we contacted insisted that Ankara will not proceed to implement the “Blue Homeland” – besides the Turkish-Libyan memorandum (delineating maritime influence zones) which it will defend tooth and nail – but, through the concept it clearly projects its red lines in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. Those red lines proved to be flexible and vulnerable when Turkey could not react to the Greek-Egyptian demarcation agreement. Thus, “Blue Homeland” cannot be fully defended due to its maximalism and the opposition of other regional actors. However, when the “Blue Homeland” map depicts all the claims of the neighboring country unified under the “Great Idea” of the “Turkish Century,” even if six out of 10 Turks ignore it as a concept, they perceive those that put obstacles to its unfettered implementation as opponents and enemies.

In addition to its theoretical dimension, the “Blue Homeland” is also meaningful at the operational level. Turkey, in addition to claiming a huge EEZ, envisions the interconnection with the geopolitical spaces outside the Eastern Mediterranean.

Understandably, the stakes for Greece are fundamental because the “Blue Homeland” is directed against its vital interests. It potentially cuts it off from the Eastern Mediterranean, denies it any right to maritime zones east of the 25th meridian and effectively subjects the Greek islands to Turkey’s maritime jurisdiction.

The “Blue Homeland” contains within it, provides ideological justification for, and updates the casus belli concept.

The dangers

For Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, the big question is whether the “Blue Homeland” is a non-negotiable ideological project or a more flexible geostrategic preference that can be open to adjustments in the context of a regional settlement, subject to ultimately mutually tolerable compromises. In the first case, the scope for consultation and negotiation with the Turkish side is minimal. The “Blue Homeland” is primarily, if not exclusively, an absolute rejection of the Greek and Cypriot legal positions and a usurpation of sovereign rights, even the sovereignty of Hellenism. It is still an aggressive response to the “Maniatis Law” (a 2011 law named after the Greek deputy environment, energy and climate change minister of the time, Yiannis Maniatis, who introduced legislation delineating the Greek zones for oil and gas research) and the “Seville Map” (which delineates EU members’ EEZs), although the latter is not an official Greek position. It is also a response to various multilateral regional initiatives, which Turkey believes are aimed at marginalizing it. Therefore, having the “Blue Homeland” as its basis, Ankara seeks three things: first, not to be excluded from the allocation of resources and to have a say in most of the energy transport plans; second, to freeze the tripartite cooperation schemes in which Greece and Cyprus participate, with US blessings; third, to avoid being excluded from the cooperation schemes, security, energy and geopolitical ones, in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, for example, its offers to Cairo to entice it to cancel the demarcation agreement with Nicosia and accept a bilateral one with Ankara, as well as the Turkish-Libyan agreement, which confirm the above points.

In conclusion, Turkey sought through the intimidating maximalism of a map (the “Blue Homeland” map) that only it and some in Libya recognize, to overturn the unfavorable balance in the Eastern Mediterranean (having first let its relations with Israel and Egypt deteriorate) and to claim an upgraded leadership role.

Understandably, the stakes for Greece are fundamental because the “Blue Homeland” is directed against its vital interests. It potentially cuts it off from the Eastern Mediterranean, denies it any right to maritime zones east of the 25th meridian and effectively subjects the Greek islands to Turkey’s maritime jurisdiction! In this context, the strategic vision of the “Blue Homeland” is based on an inherently militaristic logic, which favors the use or threat of use of force. The “Blue Homeland” contains within it, provides ideological justification for, and updates the casus belli concept.

But even if Ankara does not intend to implement the “Blue Homeland” in the foreseeable future, even if it uses it to overcome what it perceives as an attempt to containing it, even if it is a negotiating tool for Turkey to join the negotiating table from a position of strength, the “Blue Homeland” is no less dangerous for us in the long run. Experience has shown that Turkey’s various novel theories, such as the “gray zones” (areas of unclear or disputed sovereignty), are consolidated and hardened over time. The “gray zones” have evolved from areas of so-called disputed sovereignty initially, have now become “Turkish.” The new claims are simply piled upon previous ones and complement them. With the “Blue Homeland” we now have a complete picture of Turkish claims. It is a nationalist, revisionist and aggressive ideology. A ticking time bomb, which the right alliances, our deterrent power and a tough and effective negotiation will disarm. As has happened in the past with the neighboring country’s claims, if we let them mature, they will be magnified, giving Turkey the confidence to create illegal *faits accomplis*, like the Turkish-Libyan pact.

The court has rejected the Turkish argument, because it has judged that no island can be “encapsulated.”

Turkey has the obligation to negotiate the delimitation either by agreement or by court settlement. The court has emphasized that where coastal views overlap, unilateral delimitations for the exercise of sovereign rights are not permitted.

Given these facts, what are Athens' options? As long as Ankara does not abandon the maximalist character of the “Blue Homeland” doctrine, there is little room for optimism. The axes of the Greek strategy as formulated after 1974 are still completely valid. On the one hand, strong and modern armed forces at the service of a credible and economically viable deterrent doctrine. At the same time, partnerships and alliances that strengthen our diplomatic outreach and strengthen power factors, such as the economy. The second axis is an integrated plan of full normalization which will aim at neutralizing Turkish maximalism, in the service of the logic of mutual benefits. A difficult balancing act that Greek diplomacy has proven it can back up.

What the International Court has said about the issues raised by Ankara

The “Blue Homeland” is a mixture of claims designed to show how Turkey understands the use and delimitation of maritime zones. Of course, it does not claim closed-sea sovereignty, something that would run counter to the principle of freedom of the seas that Turkey so often invokes. At first sight it is necessary to clarify whether the islands are entitled to a maritime zone and how much. Because in the meantime Turkey has declared it will dispute the islands' sovereignty as long as demilitarization, which, according to Turkish claims is a precondition of sovereignty, is not enforced. Additionally, the official maps are examined to see whether the islands' maritime zones have been restricted, in case they lie too close to Turkey, to ensure that the Turkish coast enjoy sufficient maritime space. At some point, Turkey has claimed that the “equidistance” principle applies to demarcating maritime zones in seas such as the Aegean.

Ankara, using the Turkish-Libyan demarcation, considers itself not bound to negotiate with Athens to determine the areas of exercise of sovereign continental shelf/EEZ rights in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the Aegean, it highlights the requirement of unilaterally or bilaterally demarcating a continental shelf between the two mainlands. The islands for Turkey are either not entitled to a continental shelf or, because they lie on the “wrong side,” they are placed within the Turkish maritime zone. There is a third factor, that, because of their position, the islands prevent the coasts from projecting claims. All three cases have been decided by the courts. Regarding the first case – with the Nicaragua/Colombia decision (2012) – every island has rights, which by definition cannot be denied. Regarding the second, the same court has rejected the Turkish argument, because it has judged that no island can be “encapsulated.” The same applies mutatis mutandis (“once the necessary adjustments have been made”) to the third case. Therefore, Turkey cannot decide the fate of the islands in terms of demarcation, nor discount Greece's claims, without a consensual settlement or a court decision.

Greece's protest has created a dispute and Turkey has the obligation to negotiate the delimitation either by agreement or by court settlement. The court has emphasized that where coastal views overlap, unilateral delimitations for the exercise of sovereign rights are not permitted. Neither the filing of coordinates, or maps, constitute a substantive demarcation title, nor do they have inherent legal force; they merely demonstrate the filing party' claims and their extent as understood by each individual state. Therefore, as long as there is a dispute, there is an obligation to refrain from unilateral continental shelf research actions, that is looking for natural resources, because they are an obstacle to the possibility of an agreement on delimitation. At the same time, both parties are bound by the Bern Agreement (moratorium, 1976), the validity of which they have never questioned.

Summary

Weighing the facts on the road to The Hague

- Apart from a Treaty, the only alternative which does not lead to conflict—which would be catastrophic for both countries in every respect—is to maintain the status quo. It is the option with the smallest political toll, but it is not without cost.
- It is estimated that, on average, we have been spending about 4% of GDP on Defense over the last half century. At present prices, that means we have spent close to 400 billion euros (which is precisely the level of Greece's public debt today)!
- In a few years, even if they exist and are exploitable, the hydrocarbon deposits will have been rendered meaningless by the climate crisis and the green transition that will inevitably accompany it.
- So, while kicking the can down the road may allow us to retain our "sovereign rights" intact on a theoretical (and imaginary) level, in practice, if we do not delineate, we will have nothing beyond 6 nautical miles of sovereignty.
- The accusatory and rejectionist discourse (even when justified) creates denial and offers no solutions. The delusional belief that realities can be willed into being ("our noble blindness") leads to dangerous illusions and strategic dead ends.
- On those occasions where the Greek side accompanies its accusations with proposed (counter)actions, these are usually inappropriate and unrealistic and sometimes even dangerous. Unilateral action on our part would justify a Turkish reaction, drag Greece down to Turkey's level, and shift the resolution process from the arena of law (where we have a comparative advantage) to the "field of force".
- "Admirers" of Turkish policy are confusing that country's geopolitical importance with its strategic importance. If Turkey did not have the Straits along with a youthful population of 85 million and the second largest army in NATO, no one would care less if "Ankara were lost".
- It is clear that however valuable Turkey may be on the geopolitical chessboard, it (and its president in particular) are becoming ever more unreliable in Western eyes.
- Illegal acts, such as the seismic surveys conducted by the "Oruc Reis" in an undelimited/disputed area do not produce law and cannot be remedied by reciprocal actions.
- Straying from our principles and opting for bilateral delimitation would be a misguided move and a gift to Turkey's public diplomacy.
- At this historic juncture, Turkey cannot continue its diplomacy of coercion against our country without incurring high costs. Both the US and the EU have fully grasped the transactional logic that underlies Turkey's actions and have adjusted their stance accordingly.
- If we postpone our attempts at settlement for the future, we may find ourselves in a very different and far more dangerous world, with our issues with Turkey still outstanding. We will, in other words, simply have passed the buck on to future generations, who will have to deal with it under potentially worse conditions.
- In contrast, a solution reached on the basis of international law will ensure our rights along with security and stability. So if there is a window of opportunity, however small, it would be best to seize it while we can.

After nearly four years of unprecedented tension and aggression on Turkey's part, Ankara appears to have abandoned - for the time being at least - the tactic of coercion diplomacy by exercising constant and mounting pressure on Greece, in favor of de-escalation.

...revisionism comes at a cost, especially when accompanied by international destabilization, and even more so when it threatens Western and NATO unity.

DURING THEIR RECENT MEETING ON THE SIDELINES OF THE NATO SUMMIT AT VILNIUS, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan appeared ready for a tentative rapprochement that may lead to a negotiation down the line. Even though such a prospect is still a long way away, the discussion has already started – with no shortage of passion and hyperbole. Taking a close look at the prospects for talks, there are three elements – related ones – that are key to any negotiation going forward: the terms and framework under which they will be conducted, the alternatives in the event that an agreement is not reached, and the timing. The question of timing, for example, refers both to which of the two sides is more pressed for a deal and also to the evolution of events that affect the dynamic between the two sides and would inevitably also influence their alternatives.

Terms & framework

After nearly four years of unprecedented tension and aggression on Turkey's part, Ankara appears to have abandoned – for the time being at least – the tactic of coercion diplomacy by exercising constant and mounting pressure on Greece, in favor of de-escalation. Most analysts have attributed this change of attitude to earthquake diplomacy, though there had been signs of a thaw before that too. In fact, February's devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Greece's immediate response with assistance simply helped the thaw take place by providing a convenient alibi for the shift in Ankara's stance, even if it was just a tactical decision. The shift came in the wake of similar overtures by Turkey to Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The reasons, therefore, run deeper and have to do with the state of the Turkish economy and the war in Ukraine. The war, in particular, has affected and even limited Turkey's options on several levels.

The Ukraine war has served as proof that revisionism comes at a cost, especially when accompanied by international destabilization, and even more so when it threatens Western and NATO unity.

To begin with, it has served as proof that revisionism comes at a cost, especially when accompanied by international destabilization, and even more so when it threatens Western and NATO unity. The cohesion shown by the West and the fact that the overwhelming majority of states in the Alliance are on the same page with regard to the Russian threat has restricted Ankara's scope, even though its role has been elevated by the war. Furthermore, Moscow's fall from grace, the reversal of roles between Turkey and Russia, NATO's expansion and the United States' fresh interest in Europe have shaped a new security environment that does not favor the aggression and the strategic autonomy that Ankara has always sought. At the same time, Greece's enhanced status in the Western camp – both as a result of its stance on Ukraine and because of Alexandroupoli port's multifaceted geopolitical role – has had a significant impact on Turkey's strategic planning.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that both the US and the European Union have renewed their interest in seeing Greek-Turkish relations improve. Without overlooking the fact that Turkish revisionism is the main problem, the above create a situation that could facilitate a more meaningful negotiation on the basis of international law, just as Athens has consistently wanted for half a century.

The (non) alternatives

Realistically, maintaining the status quo is the only alternative that would not lead to conflict - something that would be devastating in every respect for both sides. It is the option with the smallest political toll, though it is not without cost.

... hydrocarbon deposits will be of little value in a few years' time as a result of the climate crisis and the green transition that it will inevitably prompt.

Any unilateral moves from Greece would justify Turkish reactions, put us on a par with it and shift the resolution process from the arena of the law (where we have a comparative advantage) to the arena of might.

Realistically, maintaining the status quo is the only alternative that would not lead to conflict – something that would be devastating in every respect for both sides. It is the option with the smallest political toll, though it is not without cost. Greece is spending enormous amounts of money and diplomatic capital on prevention and deterrence. It is estimated that Greece has been spending around 4% of its gross domestic product on defense annually in the past 50 years, on average. At present prices, we have spent nearly 400 billion euros (equal to the public debt). It is likely, therefore, that the arms race prompted by our dispute over the continental shelf will cost us a lot more than any anticipated earnings from the discovery of valuable resources. Furthermore, there is also the question of missed opportunities. If this money were instead invested in the welfare state, in infrastructure and in other essential areas, it would bring significant benefits to the economy and society. What's more, hydrocarbon deposits will be of little value in a few years' time as a result of the climate crisis and the green transition that it will inevitably prompt.

By kicking the can down the road, therefore, we may maintain our “sovereign rights” at the theoretical (and indeed imaginary) level, but in practical terms, by not delineating, we will have nothing beyond 6 nautical miles. We want an exclusive economic zone that stretches all the way to Cyprus, but for the time being, we can't even conduct seismic surveys in the middle of the Thermaic Gulf, off the coast of Thessaloniki.

Many analysts and pundits are opposed to a rapprochement with Turkey because of its recidivism, while they also doubt – quite reasonably – to what degree Ankara would agree to a solution based on international law. The problem with such analyses is that they may not be wrong in terms of their arguments, but they fail to present a credible and realistic alternative. They present challenges without solutions, and the result is ultimately the same: no progress. And if there is one side that wants to prevent talks from taking place, that should not be Greece.

Rejectionism (even when justified) creates denial and offers no solutions. Voluntarism that is completely out of touch with reality leads to dangerous self-deception and strategic impasses. In many cases when some kind of response from the Greek side is suggested, the recommendation tends to be off the mark, unrealistic and bordering on the dangerous. Throughout, Greece has based its strategy on international law and any deviation from these principles is a strategic mistake. Any unilateral moves from Greece would justify Turkish reactions, put us on a par with it and shift the resolution process from the arena of the law (where we have a comparative advantage) to the arena of might. Consistency is, after all, one of Greece's greatest comparative advantages vis-a-vis its neighbor.

Proposals for an immediate EEZ delimitation agreement with Cyprus in order to present Ankara with a *fait accompli* are also impractical. It would raise eyebrows in neighboring countries, such as Egypt – a significant regional player and one of the most important Arab states with which we want a trusting and functional relationship – while the international community would see it as contravening the Law of the Sea, the very legislation invoked by Greece. Most importantly, though, it would prompt an immediate response from Ankara, which would censure us for excluding it from the discussion before going on to violate the agreement with Nicosia in all manner of ways (with seismic survey vessels, drillships etc.), thus putting us in a position where we would have to defend the EEZ. And given Cyprus' objective weakness, we would be alone in this task.

Others still argue that Greece needs to respond to Turkey's claims with claims (for what?) of its own, that we too should adopt a revisionist stance, that we should follow in Turkey's footsteps even though we do not have the same characteristics. They suggest that we should sit down as revisionist to revisionist, putting all of our respective claims on the table, instead of talking like a state that defends the status quo on the basis of international law.

Others still argue that Greece needs to respond to Turkey's claims with claims (for what?) of its own, that we too should adopt a revisionist stance, that we should follow in Turkey's footsteps even though we do not have the same characteristics. They suggest that we should sit down as revisionist to revisionist, putting all of our respective claims on the table, instead of talking like a state that defends the status quo on the basis of international law. This is an approach that is typically shortsighted, both at the strategic and tactical levels.

Then there are those who, bizarrely, admire Turkey's foreign policy and Erdogan's actions, outdoing even the Anadolu news agency with their talk of the "president's success." Erdogan is practically without fault in their eyes. Given, however, how often and how quickly his policy changes, it makes no sense to regard one move as a success when he goes on to do the exact opposite a few days later. What these "admirers" of Turkish foreign policy are doing is, essentially, confusing the country's geopolitical significance with its strategic one. If Turkey did not have the Straits, if it were not on the Black Sea and did not share borders with Iran, Iraq, Syria and Central Asia; if it did not have a youthful and robust population of 85 million and the second-largest military in NATO (also being the only Muslim country in the Western Alliance), no one would tolerate Erdogan's blackmail and antics. No one would tolerate his ties with Russia's Vladimir Putin and the way he has undermined the sanctions against Russia. No one would care if Turkey were "lost." Anyone who has spoken with international players knows that Turkey (and its president especially) may be regarded as a valuable piece on the geopolitical chessboard but is also seen as equally unreliable in Western capitals.

Timing

Anyone who has spoken with international players knows that Turkey (and its president especially) may be regarded as a valuable piece on the geopolitical chessboard but is also seen as equally unreliable in Western capitals.

For several reasons related to timing, this moment appears to be the most opportune period in the last two decades to initiate substantial dialogue with Turkey. Our relations are not developing in a vacuum but within an international system where the West seeks to redefine its status and regional as well as global security architecture following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, the priorities of both leaderships differ, particularly in Turkey's case. Erdogan is facing pressure to revive the economy, which in turn requires adjustments not only in the economic realm but also in the geopolitical reality. Ankara must consider how it can attract investment capital beyond simply selling off national assets to Arab monarchies, as its external policy actions are causing instability. If it undermines the interests of the West on every occasion, how can it expect political and economic support from those countries?

The arms race prompted by our dispute over the continental shelf will cost us a lot more than any anticipated earnings from the discovery of valuable resources.

Therefore, at this historic juncture, Turkey cannot continue its policy of coercion against Greece without facing significant consequences. It is now politically evident to most of Greece's partners that any process or negotiation should strictly adhere to international law. Both the US and the EU have recognized the transactional logic guiding Turkish actions and, accordingly, adjusted their stances. Any overtures they make toward Turkey are contingent on the latter's compliance with agreed-upon terms and a quid pro quo approach, with the potential for reversibility. Ankara must in the foreseeable future strive to improve, and perhaps even rekindle, its relationship with the West due to its economic needs. President Erdogan even brought up the modernization of the Customs Union, which could involve borrowing European money to avoid dealing with the IMF. Greece and

Cyprus would have a say in this. Additionally, even under terms of hard power, the current situation has visibly improved. To conclude, it is unlikely that a more favorable conjuncture will arise in the foreseeable future.

Of course, the future is inherently unpredictable, but we can identify certain trends and make projections. The international system, based on rules, is currently in a state of flux. The rules that underpin our rights and strategy are facing challenges from various directions. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is causing significant disruptions to Europe's post-war security architecture, while in the South China Sea, China continues to violate and disregard the Convention on the Law of the Sea. Moreover, any change in US leadership may further disrupt balances, and the European Union's internal divisions are hindering its ability to achieve strategic autonomy. As Simon Tisdall pointed out in *The Guardian*: "Instability grips a weakened Europe as global predators smell blood – threats from Russia and China, weakening security alliances with the US, and internal social and political divisions reveal fundamental strategic weaknesses. Europe increasingly resembles a beleaguered democratic island in an anarchic world, where a rising tide of authoritarianism, impunity and international rule-breaking threatens to inundate it."

Unlawful actions, such as the seismic surveys conducted by Turkey's Oruc Reis exploration vessel, do not produce any legal effects and cannot be remedied through reciprocal actions.

Furthermore, the evolution of parameters affecting the balance of power and the dynamics of relations with Turkey is critical. Over the past 50 years, all comparative indicators, both qualitative and quantitative, have shifted against Greece. In 1970, we had almost the same GDP as Turkey, and Turkey had a population four times larger than Greece's. Today, Turkey's GDP is four times larger than Greece's, and its population is nearly nine times larger, with an average age of 31, much younger than Greece's, which is around 45. These trends do not seem likely to reverse in the foreseeable future. Postponing efforts at a settlement could lead us into a vastly different and more dangerous world, with our issues with Turkey remaining unresolved. We would then pass this problem on to the next generations, who would have to manage it under potentially worse conditions.

Geography is destiny. Greece must find a way to coexist with the Turkey that exists in reality, rather than the one it wishes were there. A potential resolution based on international law ensures Greece's rights, security and stability. If there is even a small window of opportunity, it would be wise to seize it. Athens will negotiate with self-assurance, not out of fear or weakness, but as it deems it the right choice at the current juncture. Of course, the country will not cease to support and modernize its armed forces and other elements of power and deterrence.

Postponing efforts at a settlement could lead us into a vastly different and more dangerous world, with our issues with Turkey remaining unresolved. We would then pass this problem on to the next generations, who would have to manage it under potentially worse conditions.

Continental shelf & EEZ

Greece has consistently based its strategy on the international Law of the Sea, according to which the sovereign rights of the continental shelf exist ipso facto and ab initio; and those to an exclusive economic zone if delineated. However, they are not automatically exercised. Unlike territorial waters, where extending them is a unilateral act – for it concerns sovereignty – the consolidation and exercise of rights over the continental shelf and the EEZ require demarcation with the neighboring states, either through agreements or judicial settlement. Until then, Greece can only make claims, while a unilateral delimitation or unilateral actions, such as seismic surveys, do not confer rights as long as there is an obligation for delimitation and refraining from such actions.

Unlawful actions, such as the seismic surveys conducted by Turkey's Oruc Reis exploration vessel, do not produce any legal effects and cannot be remedied through reciprocal

actions. If we persist in making a claim – erroneously, in an undelimited area – that it constitutes a right, we will be faced with the dilemma of either tolerating a continuous violation of this “right” or becoming entangled in a conflict to defend it.

The argument is frequently made that Greece does not need to engage in negotiations with Turkey because the continental shelf exists *ipso facto* and *ab initio*, thereby suggesting that the problem lies in Greek timidity. This argument overlooks that the same principle applies to Ankara: The Turkish continental shelf also exists *ipso facto* and *ab initio*. Straying from our principles and opting for bilateral delimitation would be an erroneous move and a concession to Turkey’s public diplomacy.

Turkey is not only a “persistent objector” to an extension of Greece’s territorial waters beyond 6 nautical miles, but it also objects to any unilateral Greek action. It would respond actively in order to halt the exercise of continental shelf rights or the declaration of an EEZ. Turkey is waiting for an opportunity, expecting Athens to take such an action, so that it can accuse Greece of creating an “iron curtain” against Turkey. This would be used as a pretext to justify any attempts to create a *fait accompli*, portraying it as a necessary reaction or choice. Turkey would then assert to foreign actors that the responsibility for the escalation lies with the Greek side.

Summary

Who benefits from Greek-Turkish relations deadlock?

- The context is also shaped by Turkey's political, social, economic, demographic and technological/industrial development, and of course by its strategic ambition to establish itself as an independent and substantial regional and global player. Any analysis of Greek-Turkish relations must begin from this.
- The conviction held in Ankara's national security circles that the international system is no longer Western-centric, and has entered a post-Western phase, has also led to a return to the traditional policy of sitting on the fence.
- The strategic contradiction facing Ankara is this: while it cannot gain full strategic autonomy as long as it remains a member of the Alliance, it is not currently in its national interest to do so! Turkey needs to remain in NATO so it can coercively influence the Alliance's decision-making in its own interests, but also because outside NATO, it would find itself in a quasi-confrontational situation with it.
- The West's stance toward Turkey is equally inconsistent. It considers it both intolerable and an indispensable partner.
- Which means that our Western allies' tolerate Turkey primarily out of a desire to avoid conflict.
- Unilateral actions on our part would leave us strategically isolated, rob us of "external goodwill" and legitimize Turkish reactions to some degree.
- Those advocating actions whose international legitimacy is dubious at best, or which lack broad international support, unknowingly risk setting a sequence of actions and reactions in motion that would ultimately lead us to the negotiating table they so despise, but with far less to negotiate with.
- Turkey has successfully imposed a peculiar type of area denial, whereby Greece cannot exercise its sovereign rights in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean unimpeded, as ever more aspects of its sovereignty become subject to systematic challenges. Greece, on the other hand, can neither agree to the conditions set by Turkey nor break the deadlock by means of conflict.
- The present situation costs Turkey nothing, but it also allows it to exploit the anarchic international environment to impose a suffocating condition of ever-growing claims coupled with an erosion of Greek sovereignty and a usurpation of our sovereign rights.
- As long as the issues remain unresolved, we remain stuck at 6 nautical miles. We cannot delimit a continental shelf and neither exercise nor safeguard our sovereign rights.
- The present situation is a dead end: it is not in our interests, it does not guarantee our rights, and the future is shaping up to be no better than the present.
- If there is even a faint prospect of recourse to The Hague or arbitration, then Greece must pursue it, though without relaxing its efforts to upgrade and modernize its armed forces.

...the present situation is influenced by Turkey's progress across various dimensions: political, social, economic, demographic, technological/ industrial, and, certainly, its strategic ambition to establish itself as an independent and substantial regional and global player. Any examination of Greek-Turkish relations should commence from this standpoint.

Over the past two decades, particularly since the failed coup in 2016, Ankara's strategic choices have taken on a notably more confrontational and nationalist character, marked by clear neo-Ottoman and Islamic influences.

IN OUR PREVIOUS ARTICLE TITLED “WEIGHING THE FACTS ON THE ROAD TO THE HAGUE,” we attempted to assess the current circumstances and any prospects for progress in Greek-Turkish relations. Our analysis was based on three interconnected elements crucial to negotiations: the terms and framework within which they should occur, alternatives in the event of failure, and the timing and context of these negotiations. Naturally, all of this was considered in light of the existing balance of power, both in the present and the not-too-distant future. We briefly explored the alternatives in case a resolution to our dispute does not materialize through international justice (which is the most likely scenario under the current circumstances).

Our conclusion was that if even a faint prospect of resorting to The Hague or arbitration exists, Greek diplomacy should pursue it vigorously without relaxing its efforts to enhance and modernize its armed forces. After all, this has been a cornerstone of Greek foreign policy for half a century and should not be misconstrued as appeasement. Only those lacking knowledge of international affairs would perceive it as such.

The reactions were mixed, encompassing both positive and negative feedback. The majority of dissenting voices maintained a level of respect, although a few displayed a clear misunderstanding of the text, coupled with distortions of our arguments. In some cases, these critics resorted to ad hominem attacks and accusations that we were serving as forerunners to an already-decided “retreat.” So be it.

The internal discourse is only just beginning, and let's hope it unfolds with terms that truly serve our national interests, meaning sincerity. However, it's crucial to underscore two key points. The first one pertains to Turkey. What we aim to emphasize in our analysis is that the present situation is influenced by Turkey's progress across various dimensions: political, social, economic, demographic, technological/industrial, and, certainly, its strategic ambition to establish itself as an independent and substantial regional and global player. Any examination of Greek-Turkish relations should commence from this standpoint. It's a mistake to evaluate bilateral interactions based on the Turkey we wish to see, rather than the Turkey we are actually confronting.

Turkey's stance

Over the past two decades, particularly since the failed coup in 2016, Ankara's strategic choices have taken on a notably more confrontational and nationalist character, marked by clear neo-Ottoman and Islamic influences. This shift has rekindled discussions about Turkey's relationship with the West. However, this debate rests on a flawed premise, assuming that Turkey was once a Western nation that has recently “strayed” due to its idiosyncratic president. In reality, Turkey has never been a true part of the West, even from a geopolitical perspective, except during the Cold War period. Its NATO membership was primarily driven by the threat posed by the USSR rather than shared ideological or geopolitical alignments.

The decreasing threat from the former USSR and the power vacuum resulting from the relative disengagement of the United States in the broader Middle East enabled Ankara to loosen its bonds with the West and pursue a path toward strategic autonomy. The deeply held belief within Ankara's national security circles that the international system has shifted away from Western centrality and is evolving toward a post-Western order has also led to a resurgence of traditional fence-sitting.

In reality, Turkey has never been a true part of the West, even from a geopolitical perspective, except during the Cold War period.

Turkey remains heavily reliant on the West in terms of economics, technology and politics, and its involvement in NATO places constraints on its strategic independence. The inherent contradiction for Ankara lies in its inability to achieve complete strategic autonomy while maintaining its membership in the Alliance.

As long as Turkey refrains from crossing the “first-strike” threshold, it can actively pursue its revisionist agenda with relatively few consequences.

However, both autonomy and balance have their limits. Turkey remains heavily reliant on the West in terms of economics, technology and politics, and its involvement in NATO places constraints on its strategic independence. The inherent contradiction for Ankara lies in its inability to achieve complete strategic autonomy while maintaining its membership in the Alliance, and currently, it has no interest in leaving. NATO is significant to Turkey not only because it exerts coercive influence on decision-making, but also because, if it were outside the Alliance, Turkey would find itself in a state of constant confrontation with it.

This strategic paradox also places restrictions on Turkey’s assertiveness toward our country, as we are formally considered “allies.” To overcome these constraints, Turkey employs coercive diplomacy whenever possible, pressuring us and attempting to provoke Greece into using violence first. This Turkish strategy escalated between 2019 and 2022. Now, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Turkey’s room to implement this coercive policy, though not eradicated, has considerably diminished. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Turkey has stopped exploiting its geopolitical position in pursuit of Western, particularly US, leniency. Its objective remains operating in a gray area, operating at or even beyond the bounds of international law. It is, to say the least, audacious for Turkey to accuse Greece of “violating the Treaty of Lausanne” in an attempt to portray Turkish aggression as “defense” and evade creating a fait accompli on our part.

It is noteworthy that even moderate Turkish observers attribute the signing of the illegal Turkey-Libya maritime boundaries agreement and the development of the Blue Homeland foreign policy dogma to their country’s response to perceived attempts to isolate it from Greece and Cyprus through trilateral schemes involving Israel and Egypt.

Similarly, the West’s stance toward Turkey appears to be inconsistent. Turkey is seen as both an intolerable and indispensable partner. However, within the context of Western interests, what matters most is preventing an intra-NATO conflict rather than resolving bilateral disputes. While the latter would be desirable, it is not deemed imperative as long as the situation remains manageable within certain limits. Consequently, Western restraint toward Turkey primarily focuses on conflict avoidance.

Greece’s stance

As long as Turkey refrains from crossing the “first-strike” threshold, it can actively pursue its revisionist agenda with relatively few consequences. Even in cases where it violated the territorial waters and the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of Cyprus, an EU member-state, the sanctions imposed on Turkey were largely inconsequential.

The use of force or even specific unilateral actions on our part would lead to strategic isolation, the loss of our good reputation and, to some extent, legitimization of Turkish reactions.

Greece, for its part, follows a strategic mix of internal (deterrence) and external (deterrence through alliances and partnerships) balancing. Especially regarding the second, our participation in NATO and the EU, the strategic agreements with France and the US, and the opening to countries with a wide reach, such as India, to a large extent strengthen us, but do not solve the issue of asserting and exercising our sovereign rights. Our alliances act as a balance against Turkish designs, but at the same time they bind us. Given the vital interests of the West in the region, the use of force or even specific

unilateral actions on our part would lead to strategic isolation, loss of our good reputation and, to some extent, legitimization of Turkish reactions.

...the use of force or even specific unilateral actions on our part would lead to strategic isolation, loss of our good reputation and, to some extent, legitimization of Turkish reactions.

For the aforementioned reasons, the two countries have not clashed in the last 100 years, despite the fact that, since 1955, there have been many serious crises in bilateral relations. Both countries are trapped in a game of tension and zero-sum logic. Turkey has managed to impose a peculiar area denial, where Greece cannot fully exercise its sovereign rights in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, while more and more aspects of its sovereignty are systematically questioned. We, on the other hand, can neither agree to the conditions set by Turkey, nor overcome the impasse through a conflict, unless of course we need to defend our territorial integrity. So, what are the options?

Examining different options

And here we come to the second point. In general, there are no comprehensive alternative proposals that would actually improve our position in relation to Turkey. Weapon procurement works as a deterrent and certainly strengthens us in negotiations, but it does not produce solutions. As long as they are not combined with the development of a domestic defense industry (from 1974 to 2010 we spent 218 billion euros on the procurement of weapons) they work for the limited lifetime of the systems, at the expense, however, of the other important parameter of power, which is the economy, and without the benefit of adopting a model to gradually limit our technological/defense dependence.

The war in Ukraine, moreover, demonstrated that when the domestic defense industry does not cover operational needs, the dependence on third countries becomes almost absolute.

The war in Ukraine, moreover, demonstrated that when the domestic defense industry does not cover operational needs, the dependence on third countries becomes almost absolute.

A common component of several of the alternative “proposals” is that they reproduce inaction, without a realistic strategic goal, under the pretext of Turkish intransigence. However, as long as the issues are not resolved – obviously in a sustainable way and in accordance with the national interests – we remain trapped at 6 nautical miles of territorial waters. We cannot delimit our continental shelf, we cannot exercise sovereign rights, and we do not safeguard them either. In addition to what we mentioned in our previous article, inaction makes it easier for Ankara to maintain a state of disputed sovereignty in areas of vital interest to us. And if we are being accused of utopian expectations, what should one describe the expectation that at some point in the future things will change, Turkey will change and the problems will be solved in a magical way?

However, as long as the issues are not resolved - obviously in a sustainable way and in accordance with the national interests - we remain trapped at 6 nautical miles of territorial waters. We cannot delimit our continental shelf, we cannot exercise sovereign rights, and we do not safeguard them either.

There’s something else, too. Some believe that the easiest way, and a way to receive immediate media visibility and popularity, is the adoption of the so-called “hard” line on national issues. Their contribution to the public debate, beyond denouncing and demonizing the opposing point of view, consists of promoting proposals that are unknowingly (or, worse, knowingly) either utopian or dangerously harmful to our country.

The problem is not that they inflate minds and satisfy public opinion with platitudes and maximalist views, but that they create illusions and cultivate the belief that the solution is simple and what is missing is determination and boldness. However, if there were simple solutions someone would have found them 50 years ago. It’s not that no one thought of them, it’s that some ideas that have prevailed in the public debate cannot implemented or do not solve the problem.

...the current situation is a dead end, it does not benefit us, it does not guarantee our rights and the future is not predicted to be better than the present. Because as long as the present situation is maintained, Turkey not only does not lose anything, but it also takes advantage of the anarchic international environment and the regional changes to impose, on the one hand, a suffocating condition of increasing claims, and on the other an erosion of our sovereignty and usurpation of our sovereign rights.

In most scenarios, after a serious crisis or even a conflict, the most likely outcome is to be driven straight to the negotiating table. Those who favor actions of dubious international legitimacy or without broad international support are prescribing – without realizing it – a line of actions and reactions at the end of which is the negotiating table (which they deplore) but with much worse terms. Additionally, our actions should be operationally supportable so as not to enable Turkey to reverse them. We should remember that the two times the crisis was militarized, in 1987 and 1996, we ended up first in Davos (and the reaffirmation of the Bern Agreement of 1976), and then with the 1997 Madrid Declaration.

On the other hand, there are actions such as the gradual expansion of our territorial waters up to 12 nautical miles, and not to the same extent in all parts of the territory, which if done at the right time, would have already extended our sovereignty, strengthening our bargaining position.

We could cite a multitude of reasons why we should avoid dialogue and negotiation with Ankara. We know Turkey well: its mentality, its revisionism and its illegal actions, which we have highlighted with arguments in various fora, mainly abroad. However, after a lot of study, thinking, international contacts, conferences and the experiences we have gained, we have come to the conclusion that the current situation is a dead end, it does not benefit us, it does not guarantee our rights and the future is not predicted to be better than the present. Because it is our belief that as long as the present situation is maintained, Turkey not only does not lose anything, but it also takes advantage of the anarchic international environment and the regional changes to impose, on the one hand, a suffocating condition of increasing claims, and on the other an erosion of our sovereignty and usurpation of our sovereign rights. This situation does not concern and ultimately does not interest any third party. And no third party will do the slightest thing to change it. This is our national interest and strategic duty.