



Aegean diplomacy meets domestic discord

COMMENTARY | BY RONALD MEINARDUS*

At the end of the day, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis had no choice but to show former prime minister Antonis Samaras the door. The expulsion of a former head of government from a political party is unprecedented in Greece. Yet, the rift within New Democracy did not emerge out of thin air. Samaras' criticism had recently reached a level that seriously undermined the prime minister's authority. The straw that broke the camel's back was an interview given by the 73-year-old ex-prime minister to a Sunday newspaper, in which he sharply condemned Athens' policy toward Turkey and called for the foreign minister's resignation. "What strategy are you serving if you begin a dialogue with Turkey by immediately making concessions on your initial positions?" Samaras charged.

The timing of this political provocation – most commentators described the interview as such – was calculated. Just days earlier, the foreign ministers of Turkey and Greece had met in Athens to discuss the future of the bilateral de-escalation process. Ahead of the ministers' meeting, voices from Greece's right-wing spectrum had warned against concessions on "national issues." Among these voices, alongside Samaras, was another former prime minister, Kostas Karamanlis, who described the concerns over national matters as "understandable." A key question in Greek domestic politics today is whether Samaras and Karamanlis will join forces to consolidate their criticism of the Mitsotakis government's Turkey policy and derail the rapprochement between Greece and Turkey.

The domestic dispute arises at a rare moment of harmony in trans-Aegean relations. The governments in Athens and Ankara appear to have the political will to leave tensions behind and seek solutions to the decades-old bilateral disputes in calmer waters. The high point of this trans-Aegean detente so far was the summit between Mitsotakis and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan last December, where they signed the Athens Declaration on Friendly Relations and Good Neighborliness. In an unusual display of unity, the two sides agreed on a detailed roadmap for negotiations, with Erdogan frequently emphasizing the vision of turning the Aegean into a



Greek Foreign Minister George Gerapetritis (right) and his Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan shake hands at the end of a joint news conference, in Athens, on November 8, 2024.

sea of peace and cooperation. The ambitious – and potentially historic – project has been entrusted to the foreign ministers of both nations. At their most recent meeting on November 8 in Athens, Greek Foreign Minister George Gerapetritis and his Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan were tasked with assessing whether conditions were ripe to begin talks on delimiting the continental shelf and exclusive economic zones (EEZ) in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean. Both sides stressed the positive atmosphere of the discussions, creating the impression of camaraderie. However, it soon became clear that the ministers failed to meet their ambitious goal. "It is evident that there is not yet a common framework to resolve the one major dispute we have with Turkey – that is, the delimitation of the EEZ and the continental shelf in the Aegean," Mitsotakis acknowledged, characterizing the setback.

The current phase of Greek-Turkish diplomacy is structured to ensure that such setbacks on core issues do not jeopardize the broader rapprochement process. In addition to regular foreign ministerial meetings, the two nations have institutionalized three diplomatic channels, or "pillars," as outlined in the Athens Declaration: political dialogue, a positive agenda, and confidence building measures.

Before Erdogan and Mitsotakis

are set to meet again at a summit in Turkey next spring, another round of talks between their foreign ministers is expected. While the exact content of their closed-door discussions remains unknown, it is safe to assume that the contentious issues in the Aegean will top the agenda. The entrenched positions on these matters were highlighted in a recent radio interview with Gerapetritis, who noted that Greek and Turkish negotiators have held no fewer than 64 rounds of exploratory talks on the delimitation of the continental shelf since 2002. "The answer to whether we have come close to an agreement on the delimitation is no," Gerapetritis admitted.

At best, Athens and Ankara might agree to jointly submit their differences to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. However, before the court can rule on the delimitation of the continental shelf and EEZ – a process with an all but guaranteed outcome – the two sides must make a politically sensitive preliminary decision. They need to determine the extent of their territorial waters. Greece currently claims a 6-nautical mile territorial zone around its islands in the Aegean, even though international law allows up to 12 nautical miles. Turkey has unequivocally declared that any Greek extension to 12 nautical miles would effectively turn the Aegean into a Greek lake, and would be tan-

amount to a casus belli.

The dispute over the continental shelf in the Aegean dates to the 1970s. Several attempts have been made to resolve the issue at the negotiating table. Twenty years ago, Athens and Ankara came close to an agreement. As revealed by accounts from that time, the Greek side was reportedly prepared to accept a "tiered" delineation: a 6-nautical mile zone around most Aegean islands and a 12-nautical mile claim for the mainland. The plan was to present this framework to an international court in conjunction with Turkey. However, the process was abruptly halted when Kostas Karamanlis' New Democracy won the March 2004 elections. Karamanlis, uninterested in pursuing the project, effectively ended the negotiations. A domestic political development in Greece quashed the hopes for a mutually agreeable solution.

A repeat of such a scenario today – 20 years later – is unlikely. However, this historical precedent serves as a reminder that domestic politics constrain a government's ability to reach a compromise with Turkey. What is equally certain is that without mutual concessions, the current calm in the Aegean is unlikely to last.

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