



# From escalation to normalisation

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Dear reader,

the relations between Greece and Turkey are at a crossroads. The developments of the last months have shown that the security not only of the Aegean, but of all of Europe is at stake: From the migration challenge to energy security, maritime boundaries, but also to the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic and, in the medium- to long-term, against climate change: We need cooperation, not confrontation. Europe and Turkey are neighbors. It is now time to come together.

We have asked two renowned policy experts from Greece and Turkey to draw on their experience and show us, each from their personal perspective, the way forward. Theirs are some powerful arguments, coming directly from both sides of the Aegean.

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## **“It is hard to envisage a shared future for the Eastern Mediterranean without a solution to the Cyprus Question.”**

### **A Greek-Turkish dialogue and the role of Germany**

Greek-German relations passed through several stages in the previous decade. Solidarity shown in response to the economic crisis was perceived differently in Athens and Berlin, and occasionally caused some misunderstandings. Greece and Germany managed to work together and preserve the integrity of the Eurozone though. Their cooperation gained momentum in 2015 as both countries understood the importance of a joint management – in coordination with Turkey – of the refugee crisis. From 2018 onwards, this cooperation started to expand into foreign policy affairs. Chancellor Angela Merkel and then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras envisaged a better future for the Balkan Peninsula. Tsipras made steps none of his predecessors dared to make. Working closely with his Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias they solved the name-issue with North Macedonia by striking a balanced deal with the other side, the so-called Prespes Agreement. Merkel could not but applaud this diplomatic achievement which was in line with the Berlin Process and the European orientation of North Macedonia.

Recently, Greek-German relations have also started to touch upon tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. Germany, currently holding the EU Presidency, has been seriously concerned about the risk of a military incident. It has thus attempted to mediate in order for calmness to prevail and for dialogue to start. Lessons from history suggest 2020 is not the first time Greece cooperated with Germany on the matter. The historical archive of Konstantinos Karamanlis reveals that this also happened in 1978.

Karamanlis, serving as Greece's Premier at that time, had sent a letter to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt asking for his mediation in acceptance by the Turkish government of a specific proposal he made. What he proposed was to avoid mutual provocations and start a sincere dialogue on delimiting the continental shelf or preparing a joint recourse to the International Court of Justice or to international arbitration (vol. 10, 1995 edition, pages 205-206).

History seems to repeat itself. The Greek-Turkish disagreement, which led Athens and Ankara to deploy their fleets in the Eastern Mediterranean for a period of more than four weeks, in August and September 2020, is rather similar to tensions which first erupted in November 1973 and became again evident later, during the Konstantinos Karamanlis' administration. There is only one main difference. While in previous decades Greece and Turkey disagreed on the Aegean continental shelf, they are currently at odds about old and new maritime zones in the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece's adamant position is that all islands have a right to territorial waters, a contiguous zone, an exclusive economic zone and a continental shelf. This is in accordance with Article 121 (2) of the Convention of the Law of the Sea that Turkey has not signed. On that basis, delimitation must be based on international law, governed by the principle of equidistance/median line.

The 2020 crisis took no one by surprise. For years, Turkey had been highly concerned about natural gas explorations of the Cypriot government in the exclusive economic zone of the island and more recently about the formation of the East Med Gas Forum by seven partners, namely Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian

Authority. It had been also skeptical about trilateral regional cooperation schemes with the participation of Greece, Cyprus and Israel on the one hand, and Greece, Cyprus and Egypt on the other. Since 2018, Ankara has decided to flex its military muscles in the exclusive economic zone of Cyprus by proceeding to drillings in maritime zones it considers part of its own continental shelf. And in November 2019 it signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of National Accord in Libya that created a joint maritime boundary between the two countries. Greece criticized this maritime deal for violating international law and diplomatically acted to show to the international community the deal would produce no legal results for third countries. Relevant EU statements acknowledged this.

In the end of July 2020, Turkey announced it would send 'Orus Reis' vessel for seismographic research in the Eastern Mediterranean, south of the island of Kastellorizo. The decision outlined its interest in shifting the focus of attention from Cypriot waters to Greek ones. However, President Tayyip Erdogan temporarily froze the relevant NAVTEX for 'Orus Reis' after a telephone conversation with Chancellor Angela Merkel. Berlin had already begun to mediate before this telephone conversation. On 14 July, a confidential exchange between the diplomatic advisers to the German Chancellor, the Greek Premier and the Turkish President, Jan Hecker, Eleni Sourani and Ibrahim Kalin respectively, took place in the German capital. The meeting was organised ahead of the EU Foreign Affairs Council in the wake of Hagia Sophia transformation into a mosque. It was the Turkish side which revealed information about the Berlin confidential exchange.

Almost immediately after President Erdogan froze the afore-mentioned NAVTEX in order for Greece and Turkey to engage themselves in some negotiations, Athens and Cairo signed an agreement on maritime zones to partially delimit their continental shelves. Ankara expressed its anger whereas Berlin considered the timing wrong. A new NAVTEX for 'Orus Reis' was subsequently issued by the former. The vessel left the Antalya port and

started its seismographic research accompanied by military ships. Greece frigates monitored these movements. A small military accident occurred in the second week of August. There was a collision between the Greek frigate 'Limnos' and the Turkish 'Kemal Reis'. Addressing Greek citizens on 12 August Prime Minister Mitsotakis talked about the risk of accidents as several military units had gathered close to each other.

There is a perception in several European capitals – including Berlin – that the announcement of the Greek-Egyptian maritime accord in early August was the main reason the initial mediation of Chancellor Merkel could not bear fruits. Accordingly, Turkey's decision to send 'Orus Reis' to Eastern Mediterranean waters was largely attributed to Greece's 'unreliability' in a period during which dialogue was about to start. However, it remains the right of a sovereign country like Greece to proceed to the signing of maritime accords with littoral states in the neighbourhood. Athens and Cairo respected the Convention of the Law of the Sea and came to an agreement following difficult negotiations that had lasted for years. For its part, Athens had also strongly disagreed with the relevant memorandum of understanding signed between Ankara and Tripoli. Irrespective of the legal aspects it was also the right of the two sides to proceed together.

The substance of the problem is that some maritime zones included in the Ankara-Tripoli and the Athens-Cairo accords did intersect. A peaceful arrangement of maritime zones in the Eastern Mediterranean is certainly related to these accords but goes beyond requiring compromises not only by Greece and Turkey but also by other countries in the region. Obviously, the Greek-Turkish part of the potential talks appear delicate. This is also the case for the Cypriot waters. Generally speaking, the position of Athens is aligned with that of Nicosia in recognizing the Cyprus Question as an international affair and not a bilateral dispute after the military invasion of 1974. The former does negotiate on behalf of the latter though. On the contrary, Ankara places emphasis on the rights of the Turkish-Cypriot community on the

island of Cyprus. In a piece published in the Greek daily newspaper *Hi Kathimerini* Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu explained the Turkish position. His counterpart Nikos Dendias did not refer to Cyprus in the same media debate.

It is hard to envisage a shared future for the Eastern Mediterranean without a solution to the Cyprus Question. This is why President of the European Council Charles Michel has proposed the organization of a multilateral conference. But he did not give further details on the agenda that needs to be specified in order for his idea to be assessed. Beyond the Cyprus Question, Greece favors dialogue with Turkey. In an article published simultaneously in three European newspapers, *The Times*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Le Monde* Premier Mitsotakis reiterated his commitment for dialogue and a resumption of bilateral exploratory talks which did stop in March 2016. In the case of a disagreement about the delimitation of maritime zones, he wrote that Athens and Ankara 'must seek common resolution at the Hague'.

It was impossible for Greece to return to the table of negotiations while 'Orus Reis' was researching in the Eastern Mediterranean accompanied by Turkish frigates during August and the first two weeks of September. A new opportunity arose on 12 September when Ankara decided to send the vessel back to the Antalya port. This happened the day after indeed. Theoretically, preconditions for the resumption of the exploratory bilateral talks have now been met. Germany deserves a political credit for the post 12-September calmness. Greek media also reported that a teleconference with the participation of Jan Hecker, Eleni Sourani and Ibrahim Kalin took place on 18 September. This is the same format of the face-to-face confidential exchange organized in Berlin on 14 July.

The post-12 September calmness justifies no complacency. Greece, a member of the EU family, counts on a new solidarity that is provided with different diplomatic styles. France has clearly taken its side, openly condemns Turkish provocative

practices in the Eastern Mediterranean and calls for sanctions. Germany prefers to play a more balanced role by leaving channels of communication with Ankara open and advocating for engagement. German Ambassador to Athens Ernst Reichel gave a speech in the Greek Parliament explaining that his country could not address Turkey with the utmost harshness because it would destroy its ability to mediate. Commenting later on an article of *Hi Kathimerini* Reichel went further by asserting that Germany 'is not neutral; in the dispute between Athens and Ankara in the Eastern Mediterranean but is 'committed to EU solidarity'.

The question is whether Chancellor Angela Merkel could succeed in making Greek-Turkish dialogue work and yield results. The good news is that the EU – currently under the German Presidency – is involved in regional affairs which go beyond pure economic interests. When Konstantinos Karamanlis had contacted Helmut Schmidt in 1978, Germany's role in the world was different and the structure of the world bipolar. In a multilateral world order that takes shape in 2020 Germany has the potential of taking significant diplomatic initiatives. A few years ago, no one would imagine that a Greek-Turkish crisis could be managed without American mediation. This does not mean Washington is absent. But Washington's disengagement from several regional hotspots due to its general effort in restraining the influence of China and Russia has opened the door for other actors to become politically active.

Necessary negotiations between Greece and Turkey will be a long-term process. Both sides recognize this reality. The responsibility of Germany is to combine the post-12 September calmness with the strengthening of talks about a revived EU-Turkey partnership. Greece has been a warm supporter of the European orientation of Turkey since 1999. Even if this goal will hardly be met any time soon, cooperation on some themes such as the modernization of the customs union remains possible. This is in the interest of both the EU and Turkey. The thorn, in that regard, is that Ankara believes that the EU had no competence over maritime boundary delimitation.

It is also questionable if Ankara will accept from the EU to play a bigger role in Cyprus by guaranteeing, for example, the distribution of hydrocarbon profits for the Turkish-Cypriot community.

Last but not least, Greece and Turkey are entering negotiations with clashing agendas. Greece only concentrates on maritime zones whereas Turkey makes additional claims that the former does not accept such as the demilitarization of some Aegean islands. Although experience from previous political efforts in finding a common ground between the two sides does not generate much optimism, Chancellor Merkel's bet is to leave her personal stamp for a better future in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin based on common prosperity. Greece and Turkey should not only discuss problems. They can also formulate constructive agendas contributing to a better mutual understanding. The management of the refugee crisis was recently highly politicized in the two countries. But looking at the situation beyond prejudices, they are both encountered with

exactly the same problem of hosting an extremely high number of refugees – Germany acknowledges this. More importantly, disagreements about natural gas explorations in the Eastern Mediterranean could be out of date in medium-term. Collaboration on green energy – where German innovative ideas are revolutionary – will be the new joint objective.

When there is will, there is a way.

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## “ Turkey today relies on Germany as a “balancer.”

### Turkey and Greece: will diplomacy without preconditions lead to normality?

Turkey and Greece, as two neighboring countries and NATO members, had also conflicts in the Aegean Sea in the 70's and the 90's; however, this time the conflict has some new dimensions and new actors. The increased tension between Turkey and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea in the last few weeks, however, has created something more dangerous than harsh rhetoric by the leaders of the two countries in their domestic politics and foreign policy statements. The French political involvement supporting the Greek position and the statements of President Macron have, in the view of Ankara, deteriorated the situation. The Turkish public debate was directed towards the history of “French colonialism” and France's role in the Eastern Mediterranean was presented as the emergence of “new French imperialism”. So history is revisited.

Turkey's involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean is a natural sine quo non for its politics because Turkey is a Mediterranean country with one of the longest shores. Correspondingly, all mainstream political parties in Turkey, with the exception of HDP (Pro – Kurdish Party), rallied around President Erdoğan and his government and declared their unconditional support publicly. This again strengthened President Erdoğan and the public surveys showed increased numbers supporting his political stance.

Recently, however, the Turkish government has signaled very clearly that it seeks the dialogue, by foreign minister Cavusoglu publishing an article in one of Greece's leading newspapers, Kathimerini, stating that a “fair and equitable delimitation of maritime boundaries” has to take place soon.

He also included the Cyprus issue into the equation and the search for hydrocarbons in the region: Turkey is the guarantee power together with Greece and

Great Britain, according to the 1960 agreement based on which the Republic of Cyprus was created. For this reason the Republic of Northern Cyprus declared on November 15, 1983, recognized only by Turkey, is under Turkish security legally and any discovery of oil and gas reserves in the Mediterranean will also be protected by Turkey within this guarantee power agreement. That is why the article states that: “But the Cyprus issue will remain unresolved in the foreseeable future.” The cardinal question is how the two sides can converge in the current dispute. One thing here is clear, however: The Greek Cypriots are in a stronger position as an EU member state but it is obvious that they should give certain guarantees for the fair sharing of possible oil and gas reserves in the Mediterranean.

Returning to the current dispute between Turkey and Greece, we should not forget that both countries are NATO member states. It is a general principle that NATO member states should avoid any military confrontation and solve their problems through dialogue and diplomacy within NATO channels. Otherwise the political and military philosophy of NATO would lose its meaning. As it became a political slogan in Cold War years against a possible Soviet attack: one for all and all for one!

That is why it is noticeable that the defence minister of Turkey Hulusi Akar has acted very rationally and has warned about a potential accident between two NATO members. The military show did not bring advantages for any side but only pleased for a while the domestic nationalistic feelings. The Mediterranean Sea is the route for illegal migrants and Turkey is one of the key countries to stop this flow. NATO's policy has been balanced and has provided both sides with a platform to talk on the debatable issues. But Turkey's membership is now also very much debated, never ever before in this strong sense.

When direct negotiations start again, it is expected that the Greek side shall renounce the statement to extend sea miles to 12 miles. Turkey's position will not change if the 6 miles are exceeded even by one centimeter. This is an unconditional red line of Turkey's position, declared officially. This is the first issue for talks. The other economic issues could be negotiated, as the Foreign Minister's letter indicated.

The repeated statements by EU officials and foreign ministers of member states that the EU is backing the Greek position has created in Turkish political debate a lasting and sizable disappointment and the EU was attacked by President Erdoğan, but also by most other political forces in their statements. What is important for Ankara is to "maintain a naval presence in the region not for offensive purposes, but for self defence against interferences with our seismic research activities within our continental shelf", as stated in the Kathimerini article by Minister Cavosoglu. It is seen as a response to the article by the Greek Prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, published in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung am on 11 September 2020 with the headline "Die Türkei hat die Wahl" (Turkey's Choice). In his article the Greek Prime Minister said that Turkey should go to the Court of Justice as well as indicated that the EU would support the Greek position.

Turkish expectations for an EU membership have shrunk to new lows. That some European politicians talk about a "carrot and stick" policy towards Turkey has strengthened anti-EU feelings in Turkey where now nearly 75% of the Turks believe that Turkey will not become an EU member state in the coming decades. This means that for most of the Turks the EU membership is realistic from the international law point of view since the negotiations that started on October 5, 2005 still continue; however, this possibility currently seems completely unrealistic. At least in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, Turkey has not given up the possibility of EU membership based on the motto "yesterday is yesterday, today is today, but tomorrow is another day" as the former President Süleyman Demirel stated responding to a relevant question. The future is open, and the Turks are patient!!

More specifically, thanks to the personal mediation efforts by the German chancellor Merkel, Turkey recently changed its hostile rhetoric and left space for diplomacy while taking the seismic research ship Oruç Reis to Antalya port on the suggestion of the German Chancellor Merkel. This diplomatic and political "step back" of Turkey was considered by some opposition leaders and intellectuals "a defeat" and that Turkey made concessions to Greece. However, this is not case. President Erdoğan's "controlled silence" at the moment will last as both sides have already stated their objectives.

The time now is for diplomacy and not for threatening rhetoric. To a certain degree Turkey has discovered the German "card". Germany being the strongest economic power and having the EU presidency until the end of the year cannot allow any military confrontation between a member of the EU and a country negotiating for full membership in the EU. The EU is a "peace project" and not a military power itself. This is why, diplomacy and talks are needed.

Looking beyond the September EU summit, EU leaders should be very careful how to treat Turkey during and after the talks; any "carrot and stick policy" applied to Turkey would lead to a strong reaction by the Turkish public and it would be another step to "lose Turkey" not only in political terms but also in psychological terms.

In our analysis, Turkey today relies on Germany as a "balancing agent" and expects Germany to be instrumental in putting a halt to French ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean. The recent tweet by President Macron "let's make progress" in talking to each other was received very positively in Turkey. Furthermore, the EU leaders now "tweet diplomacy"! It could be more effective actually than many people assume!! More importantly, the recent telephone talks between Merkel and Erdoğan have become more frequent and there is a general expectation now that until the 24th of September there will not be any "military and political confrontation" and that now it is time for de-escalation.

This means that Turkey now paves the way for bilateral negotiations. This attitude of the Turkish government is generally supported by the Turkish people. Turkish-Greek relations need to normalize, and any military conflict must be avoided. As two democratic countries, there are many challenges to address during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is imperative for Turkey to have good neighboring relations because of its geostrategic and geopolitical realities. Greece's reaction exceeded its military and economic realities and "overstretched" its capabilities'. The Turks, as public surveys show, united themselves against any external attacks or threats despite President Erdoğan's domestic polarization policies in recent years. This is why President Macron stepped back as well and suggested progress in talks. The Turkish President Erdoğan should not and could not be the argument for the EU not to deal with Turkey. Turkish people consider the EU a peace organization and Turkey a "security provider" not a "security consumer country" for Europe, and the EU specifically.

Actually, all sides should learn their lesson from this crisis and search for a diplomatic and political solution. Turkey and Greece have not changed their

original positions yet. The status quo is the same as before. The existing problems should be solved bilaterally and not with the involvement of third parties. The most important point is to build trust again. The Turkish public sees peace and normality as sine quo non for further developments. That Turkey comes to the negotiation table is not only a policy of the government but also the strong wish of the Turkish people.

The future will bring new challenges for all countries and the global order. The return to normal relations between the two countries, as the 1999 "earthquake diplomacy", is urgent. The new diplomacy probably will not solve the existing problems soon but for the return to normality this is an urgent requirement. The EU in this respect possesses all means and instruments. Any economic or political sanctions imposed by the EU on Turkey could damage the process of returning to normality and disappoint the Turkish people very deeply.

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