Turkey-Greece: From Maritime Brinkmanship to Dialogue

May 2021

Pluralism, Human Security & Sustainability Centre
Centre du pluralisme, de la sécurité humaine et du développement durable

Table of Contents

Principal Findings

What's new? Turkey and Greece have returned to talks after their mid-2020 dispute over sovereignty in the eastern Mediterranean Sea devolved into the longest-lasting military face-off since the 1970s. The discussions could help the parties de-escalate tensions and move from brinkmanship to dialogue.

Why did it happen? Tensions flared in 2019-2020 when Ankara – seeking a say in energy projects – sent seismic research ships to waters contested with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, intervened in Libya's civil war and signed a maritime delimitation deal with Tripoli. Turkey's rivals have increasingly aligned with Greece over competing sovereignty claims.

Why does it matter? Should talks break down again, Athens and Ankara could find themselves locked in a tenser and more dangerous stalemate than before. More hardware on the seas, higher perceived stakes because of offshore gas discoveries and more actors entangled in the region contribute to the situation's volatility.

Executive Summary

In July-August 2020, Turkish and Greek warships faced off on high alert across the eastern Mediterranean Sea in the longest-lasting showdown in the two countries' decades-old dispute over maritime sovereignty. After weeks of tension, with foreign navies entering the mix, two frigates collided, showing the risk that an accident could spill into a conflict neither side wants. Both pulled back, but only weeks later and under pressure from EU leaders. The danger will remain as long as Ankara and Athens stay locked in a cycle of brinkmanship that has nearly brought them to blows at least four times since the 1970s. That brinkmanship has increased in recent years as Turkey has become bolder in lodging claims for sovereignty over eastern Mediterranean waters and Greece has become increasingly assertive in forging ties with regional partners to hem Turkey in.

Over years of stagnant talks – Turkey and Greece cannot even agree on what to discuss – the maritime dispute between the two neighbours has grown and so has the range of issues that divide them. Maritime issues encompass disputes about delimitation of fishing rights, seabed resource exploitation and more. Beyond these issues, the disagreements stretch from sovereignty struggles that hark back to the founding periods of both states to recent bitter tussles over migration management. Looming over everything is the unresolved conflict over Cyprus. The island's Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities have been divided since 1964, when the UN set up a peacekeeping mission. In 1974, Greek Cypriots backed by the junta then ruling in Athens carried out a coup aiming to become part of Greece, and Turkey invaded in response. A decade later, Turkish Cypriots proclaimed their own republic – recognised only by Turkey – in the north of the island.

As the areas of disagreement have piled up and expanded in scope, the relationship between Athens and Ankara has also become more volatile due to geopolitics. The U.S., once an actively engaged peacekeeper in the region, is no longer so invested. Nor is it clear that Washington will reclaim this role amid a host of other pressing issues in its relations with Ankara. EU leaders are trying to fill U.S. shoes but with more limited leverage than they once had as Turkey's EU accession prospects have dwindled. Mutual North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership reduces the chance of war, but Turkey's relations within the alliance are at an all-time low due to its 2017 purchase of Russian S-400 missiles, while Greece does not trust NATO leadership to mediate fairly.

Lately, and particularly following the events of 2019, Ankara has been isolated as France and other nations, including the United Arab Emirates, have lined up behind Greece. Its recent efforts to mend ties with regional rivals Egypt and Israel have yet to bear fruit. In the meantime, its exclusion from hydrocarbon development consortia gives it every incentive to obstruct related projects, while Athens' diplomatic victories give it less motive to seek compromise.

Against this backdrop, the recent restart of dormant "exploratory talks" on how to tackle the countries' competing claims to the rocks, air and sea between them offers a sliver of opportunity. Granted, talks could not unravel the dispute despite over 60 rounds of meetings between 2002 and 2016, when they last broke down. Nor are they likely to do so today when the knots have multiplied and become even more tangled. Nevertheless, talking is a better way to build confidence than swapping imprecations

as the parties were doing almost daily in mid-2020. New talks can buy time for these two estranged neighbours and their allies to plot a course out of a crisis that has burdened the region for too long.

May 2021

Turkey-Greece: From Maritime Brinkmanship to Dialogue

I. Introduction

On 21 July 2020, Turkey announced plans to prospect for gas in disputed waters south of the Greek island of Kastellorizo, near the Turkish coast. Greece put its naval forces on alert, sparking the full deployment of the Greek and Turkish fleets across the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean Seas.[1] For days the two countries traded carefully scripted barbs. Then, on 12 August, one of the two Turkish warships escorting the *Oruç Reis*, a seismic research vessel, collided with a Greek frigate shadowing it.[2] The bump so noticeably rattled Ankara and Athens that a half-day's silence ensued.[3] The scare helped pull them back from the brink of a larger confrontation, but tensions simmered for weeks before the warships steamed back to port.

This crisis was the longest-lasting in a cycle of periodic escalations since the 1970s over competing Greek and Turkish sovereignty claims in the eastern Mediterranean – underscoring geopolitical shifts that have made the situation more volatile than before. The U.S. once kept tensions in check through its close alliances with the parties, which are both North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members hosting U.S. military bases, but in recent years it has drifted away from this role. Germany, France and NATO have tried to fill the vacuum in different ways, but they lack Washington's leverage and are seen as less than neutral arbiters. Meanwhile, Ankara's dim prospects for EU accession have removed a moderating factor in Turkish and Greek policy alike.[4] A scramble for influence in the eastern Mediterranean by newly assertive third parties further complicates the picture: Egypt, France and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have all sided with Greece in its dispute with Turkey over various maritime claims.

Over the past half-century, Athens and Ankara have found ways to talk to each other and to stop the cyclical crises from escalating. This legacy holds some promise for today. In early 2021, Greece and Turkey returned after a five-year hiatus to so-called exploratory talks intended to lay the groundwork for formal negotiations over

[1] "Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement on Turkey's new illegal NAVTEX (21 July 2020)", Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. "At least 17 Turkish warships leave port as Greek military is put on high alert", *Greek City Times*, 22 July 2020.

[2] "Tension in the Aegean: Turkey sends *Oruc Reis* south of Greek islands", Keep Talking Greece, 10 August 2020. "Greek navy frigate collides with Turkish navy frigate escorting research vessel *Oruç Reis*: Unconfirmed reports", DefPost, 13 August 2020.

[3] When Greek officials finally briefed EU foreign ministers on what happened, they claimed that the Turkish captain had put his ship in the Greek vessel's path, leaving it too little time to slow down. Ankara retorted that it had been trying to prevent the Greek navy from harassing the *Oruç Reis*. "This is how the frigate Lemnos collided with the Turkish frigate – Floating USA base arriving to Greece", *Skai*, 14 August 2020 (Greek); "They paid a heavy price: The latest view of the Greek frigate Limnos on display", *Yeni Şafak*, 14 August 2020 (Turkish).

[4] Ankara sought to show EU leaders that it was a reliable state worthy of membership, while Athens hoped that Turkey's integration would raise the cost of conflict and soften its stance on seabed claims. See Alexis Heraclides, *The Greek-Turkish Conflict in the Aegean: Imagined Enemies* (London, 2010).

maritime boundaries and related issues.[5] In over 60 rounds of meetings since 2002, they have done little to resolve the dispute, although they have at least mapped some common ground. Today, sticking points have become even stickier and new ones have emerged since the two sides last sat across the table. No swift resolution will come from a return to talks. But steady engagement, particularly if coupled with other steps to defuse tension, can have its own benefits, especially given that the sides now face each other over a dangerous buffet of "pessimism, fatigue and mistrust", in the words of a Western diplomat.[6]

This report lays out the domestic and international factors that have led to today's parlous state of affairs between Greece and Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean and what the parties, the European Union (EU), the U.S. and others might do to help the sides sustain de-escalation. It points out the dynamics that need to be in place to move toward resolution of a dispute that is increasingly interlinked with regional challenges. The report is based on dozens of interviews with Turkish and Greek officials and experts, EU officials and representatives of U.S., European and Arab governments. Future reports will look at prospects for a settlement to the Cyprus dispute and how prospecting for gas is serving as a source of conflict and cooperation for Greece, Turkey and other littoral states.

[5] Each side sent high-level representatives, including (for Turkey) President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's spokesperson İbrahim Kalın and (for Greece) veteran diplomat Pavlos Apostolidis, who had led previous talks from 2010 to 2016, to the 25 January meeting in Ankara. "Round of exploratory talks between Turkey and Greece ends", TRT Haber, 25 January 2021 (Turkish); "Exploratory contacts with Turkey: Greece is ready to commence in August – Ambassador ad hon. Apostolides remains in charge", *Iefimerida*, 6 August 2020 (Greek).

[6] Crisis Group interview, U.S. diplomat, August 2020.

II. Turkey-Greece: Old Rivals, New Tensions

A. *Fifty Fraught Years*

The Turkish-Greek dispute in the Aegean Sea is rooted in five decades of fraught relations.[7] Much of the contemporary bad blood between the two arises from the situation in Cyprus. In 1974, the junta in Athens engineered a coup in Nicosia intended to unite Cyprus with Greece. Turkey invaded and maintained a military presence in the island's northern third, which subsequently declared itself a sovereign state. The northern portion of the island, which calls itself the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, is recognised by Turkey as independent from the Greek-speaking Republic of Cyprus in the south. No other nation recognises the de facto entity's sovereignty. Although military tensions have ebbed and flowed, they have generally been high since that time. Greece sent troops to eastern Aegean islands and, in July 1975, Turkey created a new army division in the coastal province of Izmir, known as the 4th or Aegean army.

Against this backdrop, a 1976 row marked the first of four times in the last 50 years that third parties felt it necessary to intervene to stop the NATO allies from coming to blows. Disagreement over hydrocarbon exploration sparked the dispute. In August 1976, Turkey sent the *Sismik I (Hora)* research vessel into disputed waters claimed by Greece, escorted by a warship. Greece responded by putting its armed forces on full alert and sought recourse at both the UN Security Council and the International Court of Justice (ICJ).[8] To get the sides to back down, Washington held out the promise of military aid to Greece and removal of an arms embargo it had imposed to punish Turkey for the 1974 Cyprus invasion.[9] Athens and Ankara signed the Bern protocol in November 1976 agreeing to principles for their negotiations over competing continental shelf claims.[10]

The ensuing dialogue, launched at a leaders' meeting in Montreux in 1978, kicked off years of diplomatic engagement that bespeak both a mutual desire to avoid larger confrontation and the enormous challenges impeding an actual resolution of the

[7] Mutual suspicions stoking competing sovereignty claims in the Aegean go back even farther. They can be traced to the Greek war of independence from the Ottoman Empire (1821-1832) and Greco-Turkish wars of 1919-1922. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne that ended the conflict and established the borders of modern Turkey ushered in a half-century of relative quiet. But the development of new drilling technologies and expansion of maritime zones led to a rush to extract seabed resources in the 1960s and 1970s, shattering the calm.

[8] In 1976, Greece filed a case against Turkey at the International Court of Justice over the continental shelf dispute. Although the ICJ dismissed the case in 1978 for lack of jurisdiction, Greek officials continue to see the Court as the arbiter of last resort, particularly after Athens joined UNCLOS in July 1995, under which it asserted the right to extend the territorial waters of its islands from 6 to 12 nautical miles and claim continental shelf/EEZ areas of up to 200 nautical miles from them. See "Aegean Sea Continental Shelf (Greece v. Turkey)", ICJ, Judgment of 19 December 1978. Turkey is not a party to UNLCOS and says islands have limited effect on continental shelf/EEZ delimitation if their location distorts equitable delimitation or if there are other special circumstances. See Appendix B.

[9] Accounts of diplomatic engagement between Washington and the two sides are available at "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Greece; Cyprus; Turkey, 1973-1976", U.S. State Department, Office of the Historian, n.d. On U.S. diplomatic engagement with Turkey after the 1976 crisis, see "Memorandum of Conversation: The Aegean Crisis", 14 August 1976.

[10] The sides, for instance, agreed that negotiations would be secret with no leaks to the press; that they would abstain from actions that could hamper negotiations; that they would study state practice and international rules to determine "principles and practical criteria" to apply to the delimitation of their continental shelves. Heraclides, *The Greek-Turkish Conflict in the Aegean*, op. cit.

Aegean Sea disputes. In closed-door talks through 1981, negotiators tackled sensitive issues, such as the delimitation of maritime zones around eastern Greek islands close to Turkey's coastline, and even tentatively broached the idea of joint energy exploration. Then, as on many occasions since, domestic political considerations and developments in Cyprus disrupted efforts to reach a settlement.

The parties edged back to the brink twice more in the next fifteen years. In 1987, and again in 1995-1996, Turkey and Greece put their militaries on high alert. In the 1980s, tensions built as Turkey perceived Greece to be blocking its European integration aspirations and Athens resented Ankara's recognition of Turkish Cypriot independence. Turkey's deployment of the *Piri Reis* seismic research ship, flanked by two warships, into waters just outside Greek territorial seas led to a military standoff in March 1987.[11]

In the mid-1990s, ties were strained after Greece ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, under which it claimed the right to extend its territorial waters in the Aegean from 6 to 12 nautical miles. Turkey said it would view Greek exercise of this option as an act of war (*casus belli*). When, in December 1995, a Turkish bulk carrier ran aground on an uninhabited islet off the coast of Turkey – known as Imia in Greek and Kardak in Turkish – arguments over which state had jurisdiction to salvage the boat spiralled nearly out of control. Egged on by respective media, Greek and Turkish citizens scrambled to hoist the national flag over the islet. The two militaries followed suit – with warships standing by.

In each of these instances, the U.S., Britain and NATO intervened diplomatically to defuse the crisis, but diplomacy aimed at moving the sides from de-escalation to talks has always been a slog. A meeting in 1988 between then-Prime Ministers Turgut Özal and Andreas Papandreou came about only after months of messages passed through embassies. It took two more years of talks – known as the "Davos process" – to hammer out the confidence-building measures (CBMs) that remain the principal framework for the two militaries to exercise mutual restraint.[12] After the 1995-1996 flareup, Ankara and Athens spent almost three years in NATO-brokered talks to recommit to some of the same measures and agree on a number of new ones. Other mediation initiatives, such as an expert group (known as the "committee of wise men") that the Dutch sought to organise to search for solutions, never really got off the ground.[13]

Sustained U.S. diplomatic engagement throughout Bill Clinton's presidency helped pave the way for a thaw in relations from 1999 through the mid-2000s, initiated under former Foreign Ministers İsmail Cem (Turkey) and George Papandreou (Greece). The diplomatic engagement came despite or was perhaps even lent a sense of urgency by renewed tensions over an aborted Greek plan to deploy Russian-made S-300 surface-to-air missiles in the Republic of Cyprus in 1997-1998 and the capture

[11] Turkey's actions were based in part on a misperception that plans announced by a Canadian energy firm to drill in disputed waters were official Greek policy.

[12] For detailed discussion of the CBMs agreed to between the two sides, see Section V.B.

[13] The "committee of wise men" was set up in 1997 with two former diplomats, one of them a former European Court of Human Rights judge, on the Turkish side and two law professors on the Greek side. The "wise men" never met but exchanged notes for about a year through the Dutch foreign ministry. See Angelos Syrigos, *The Status of the Aegean Sea According to International Law* (Athens, 1997); and Fuat Aksu, "Confidence Building, Negotiation and Economic Cooperation Efforts in Turkish-Greek Relations", *Turkish Review of Balkan Studies* (2004).

by Turkey of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is designated as a terrorist group by Ankara, the U.S. and the EU, after he sought safe haven in the Greek embassy in Kenya in 1999.[14] Each side rallied to the other's aid following devastating earthquakes in 1999. The first round of exploratory talks began in 2002; after two years, the sides appeared closer than ever to a deal on delimitation of the continental shelf, territorial seas and airspace in contested areas of the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean.

Despite bouts of acrimony over Cyprus, the reserve of trust from this brief honeymoon helped avert major escalations in the Aegean and kept lacklustre exploratory talks going. Still, relations remained something of a rollercoaster. Greek Cypriots voted against a UN proposal known as the Annan Plan (see Section III) to reunify the island that Turkish Cypriots backed and which Ankara, the U.S. and the EU had supported. A month later, in May 2004, the Republic of Cyprus became an EU member against Turkey's objections. But when, in May 2006, a Turkish and a Greek military jet collided south of Rhodes, leading to a Greek pilot's death, the two sides made use of contacts at chief of staff level to de-escalate.[15] In the next decade, the Aegean neighbours improved trade, Greece allowed Turkish citizens to visit its eastern Aegean islands visa-free, and high-level delegations from each side met within the framework of the so-called High-Level Cooperation Council (see Section V). Exploratory talks broke down when eight Turkish military officers sought refuge in Greece after the failed coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016.[16]

From 2019, a series of escalating moves and countermoves discussed below led to an unusually long and tense standoff. A meeting between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and German attempts to mediate initially failed to calm the waters.[17] Space opened for resuming exploratory talks, however, when Ankara pulled back the *Oruç Reis* from disputed maritime zones in late November 2020 and announced a month later that the vessel would carry out seismic research in uncontested waters until 15 June 2021 (see the map in Appendix A listing Ankara's navigational advisories for *Oruç Reis* and depicting the ship's exploration areas).

B. *A Multi-faceted Dispute*

As it has evolved over the years, the Greek-Turkish maritime dispute has come to encompass a web of intertwining disputes and overlapping issues.

[14] Baskın Oran, "Turkish Foreign Policy – Volume II", 2020 (Turkish); Heraclides, *The Greek-Turkish Conflict in the Aegean*, op. cit.

[15] "Turkish pilot who shot down Iliakis over Karpathos was immediately returned to Turkey: images and video", *Iefimerida*, 8 March 2018 (Greek).

[16] "Greece: Turkish coup suspects 'not welcome', but Athens must respect judiciary", Deutsche Welle, 5 February 2019.

[17] The pair met on the sidelines of a NATO summit in London in December 2019, paving the way for political consultations in January 2020 and defence ministry discussions the next month. "Statement by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis Shortly after His Meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan", Office of the Greek Prime Minister, 4 December 2019. Amid the remonstrations of EU leaders, Ankara cancelled its exploration plans – only to revive them days later in anger over Athens signing a delimitation deal with Cairo that challenges Turkish maritime claims. "Turkey suspends eastern Mediterranean drilling, says it's ready to talk with Greece", Bianet, 29 July 2020; "Egypt and Greece sign agreement on exclusive economic zone", Reuters, 6 August 2020.

First there are disputes over Turkey's maritime boundaries with the Greek islands off its Aegean and southern coasts, where Ankara and Athens have each stretched to make claims over rocks, seas and skies. Among the most far-reaching are Greece's assertion that Kastellorizo, a 12 sq km island within swimming distance of Turkey, may claim an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extending 200 nautical miles from its coastline, drastically cutting into the zone that Turkey would claim for itself.[18] For its part, Turkey negotiated a maritime delimitation (ie, boundary) agreement with the UN-recognised government in Tripoli in 2019 that ignores the potential zones that might extend from sizeable Greek islands, including Rhodes and Crete.[19] Many other delimitation issues also arise with respect to the jigsaw puzzle of more than 2,400 islands (most of them Greek) scattered across the Aegean Sea.

Secondly, the parties disagree about what should be on the agenda between them. Beyond delimitation issues, Turkey wants to add to the list two more items. One is the demilitarisation of certain Greek islands in the eastern Aegean and the status of "grey zones", hundreds of uninhabited Aegean islets and rocks not explicitly mentioned in international treaties. Ankara says Greek military deployments on islands near Turkey have shifted the delicate security balance in the region.[20] It fears Athens' possible extension of its territorial waters in the Aegean and claim of large continental shelf areas for its eastern Aegean islands; should Greece do so, it would block Turkey out of shipping lanes traversing the Aegean high seas that Ankara sees as an economic and security lifeline.[21]

Greece refuses to consider either issue. In the former case, Athens argues that demilitarisation would undermine Greek national security in the face of Turkey's continued threat.[22] In the latter case, it says international treaties offer sufficient guidance

[18] In a declared EEZ, according to international law, coastal states have the right to explore and exploit natural and living resources while other states cannot do so without the coastal state's permission. Coastal states can also build artificial islands, installations and other structures, and conduct scientific research. All other states continue to enjoy freedom of navigation and overflight in EEZs and can also lay submarine cables and pipelines. While often the term EEZ is used interchangeably with "continental shelf", there are some differences between the two. First, the continental shelf includes only resources in the seabed and subsoil – and not living resources in the water column, such as pelagic fisheries, and the water surface. Secondly, the maximum extent of the EEZ measured from the baseline of the territorial sea limit of a coastal state is 200 nautical miles, while a state's continental shelf may extend beyond that limit up to 350 nautical miles depending on a number of geographic characteristics. Compared to the continental shelf, EEZ is a new concept, having emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Since then, states have usually preferred to delimit their EEZs/shelves together with a single delimitation line. See the relevant applicable international legal instruments, including Articles 55, 58 and 76 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Crisis Group correspondence, maritime lawyer, May 2021.

[19] Where EEZ boundaries butt up against one another, UNCLOS (to which Greece is a party and Turkey is not) says the parties must demarcate them through negotiation. But it does not prescribe how they should do so. See "UN Convention on the Law of the Sea", op. cit.

[20] Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, September 2020-March 2021. Crisis Group correspondence, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, April 2021.

[21] See Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°64, *Turkey and Greece: Time to Settle the Aegean Dispute*, 19 July 2011; and Galip Dalay, "Is There a New Window of Opportunity in the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis?", Brookings Institution, 9 December 2020.

[22] Athens cites Turkey's 1974 military intervention in Cyprus and the presence of the Turkish 4th Army in Izmir as evidence of a credible threat. It also notes Turkey's statements that Greek extension of maritime sovereignty claims to 12 nautical miles would be *casus belli*. "There is political consensus in Greece on this, history has shown Turkey's aggressive tendencies. In the case of emergency,

as to which isles belong to whom. (For a description of the parties' technical positions concerning the Aegean Sea dispute's various dimensions, see Appendix B.)

Thirdly, in addition to differing about what should be part of prospective negotiations, the parties cannot agree on a framework through which to address their disagreements. Officials in Athens have long insisted that the ICJ adjudicate delimitation issues.[23] Turkey sees the countries' maritime disputes as something that the parties must first try to resolve bilaterally; it does not rule out arbitration or recourse to the ICJ but says whatever mechanism the parties choose should cover all Aegean issues over which the two differ – not just delimitation.[24]

Beyond these issues, the unresolved dispute over Cyprus and Turkey's concerns about the growing economic and military cooperation among its regional rivals are stoking tensions. The discovery of gas in the Mediterranean seabed by Israel in 2008, Cyprus in 2011 and Egypt in 2015 raised the stakes, with Turkey worried that it will be cut out, along with its allies the Turkish Cypriots.[25]

But the mid-2020 escalation was not about gas per se. In fact, the waters where Turkey and Greece deployed naval forces are far from any known deposits. The acrimony that comes from festering clashes over sovereignty fuels and is fuelled by bilateral spats over military manoeuvres, minority rights and cultural heritage.[26] Meanwhile, Greece accuses Turkey of permitting migrants from across war-torn regions of South Asia and the Middle East to leave its shores for Greek islands or the mainland border as a means of leverage. Turkey retorts with allegations that Greece is harbouring individuals whom Ankara views as terrorists, including alleged members of the PKK and the group it labels the Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation, or FETÖ.[27] In looking for ways to find common ground, it is necessary to examine the drivers of the parties'

it's not as easy to transfer units to the islands as it is for mainland Greece, via roads. In order for any fruitful discussion to be held on that, trust has to be built up in other domains, and this will take many years (certainly more than a decade)", said a retired Greek lieutenant general. Crisis Group online interviews, Greek military experts, April and March 2021. See also Appendix B.

[23] A declaration from Greece to the court in 2015 outlines the issues that Athens sees as outside the court's jurisdiction. See "Declarations Recognising the Court's Jurisdiction as Compulsory", 14 January 2015. To apply to the ICJ, the sides would need to jointly submit questions they cannot agree on bilaterally. See "Aegean Sea Continental Shelf Case (Greece V. Turkey), Request For The Indication of Interim Measures of Protection", ICJ, 11 September 1976.

[24] "Turkey's Views Regarding the Settlement of the Aegean Problems", Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.

[25] See "The Cyprus Hydrocarbons Issue: Context, Positions and Future Scenarios", PRIO Cyprus Centre, 2013; and "Egypt's Natural Gas Crisis", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 January 2016.

[26] On the two sides' differences on such issues, see Ali Dayıoğlu and İlksoy Aslım, "Reciprocity Problem between Greece and Turkey: The Case of Muslim-Turkish and Greek Minorities", *Athens Journal of History*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 2015); and Eleni Gavra, Anastasia Bourlidou and Klairi Gkioufi, "Management of the Greeks' Ekistics and Cultural Heritage in Turkey", European Regional Science Association, August 2012.

[27] Since 2016, the Turkish state has used the designation Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation, or Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü, abbreviated in Turkish as FETÖ, to refer to followers of Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish Islamic preacher self-exiled in the U.S. since 1999. Ankara holds what it calls FETÖ responsible for the 15 July 2016 coup attempt and accuses it of infiltrating state institutions. Gülen's followers refer to him as their spiritual leader and to the movement as the Gülen, or Hizmet, movement. See Crisis Group Europe Report N°258, *Calibrating the Response: Turkey's ISIS Returnees*, 29 June 2020.

behaviour, including how domestic politics in Ankara and Athens are thwarting attempts at reconciliation.

III. The View from Turkey

Ankara's increasingly assertive approach to defending its maritime interests, particularly since early 2019, has been driven by two major frustrations: it believes, first, that Turkey and Turkish Cypriots are being excluded from potential energy riches, including by a pipeline plan; and, secondly, that other Mediterranean states are pursuing a containment policy that will chip away at Turkey's sovereignty, economic security and geopolitical reach. But Ankara is also clearly uncomfortable with the idea of being isolated.[28] Recently, it has begun making diplomatic overtures to rebuild bridges with regional powers and the West and to undercut backing for Greece.

A. *Cyprus and the Nationalist Turn*

The failure of Erdoğan's efforts to reconcile with adversaries at home and abroad in his first decade in power led to disillusionment among Turkey's political elite and his embrace over time of harder-line approaches.[29]

As prime minister from 2003 to 2014, Erdoğan took steps to address some of the grievances of Turkey's Kurds and pursued negotiations with the PKK – albeit fitfully – which drew the ire of Turkish nationalists.[30] He also took relatively conciliatory positions concerning Cyprus reunification, talks with Athens and normalisation of ties with Yerevan – widely described as a policy of "zero problems with neighbours" – that upended Ankara's foreign policy traditions. He was bolstered in these initiatives by a vibrant economy, friendly relations with Washington and Brussels, and support from Kurds and liberals in Turkey. But Erdoğan won no diplomatic victory on any of these fronts, and in the meantime found himself bleeding votes from nationalists who argued that Ankara's concessions were not serving Turkey's interests. "Any more compromise and he wouldn't have been able to maintain power", said a presidential palace source.[31]

The situation in Cyprus, which is foremost among the issues shaping Turkey's approach to the eastern Mediterranean today, has played into Erdoğan's political evolution. Following the 1974 invasion that divided the island, Ankara became the only country in the world to recognise the independence of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which was declared in 1983 on the third of the island where Turkey maintains a military presence. Nationalists in Turkey have fiercely defended the de facto republic and its claimed prerogatives ever since. But in the period between 2003-2014, Erdoğan made a volte-face. In the face of nationalist resistance, he supported a settlement plan championed by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to reunify the island at UN-sponsored talks. In tandem, the EU offered Nicosia a path to accession in 2003, with some inside the bloc arguing that the prospect would encourage Turkish Cypriots to support reunification. Turkish Cypriots did in fact vote for the Annan Plan

[28] Ilhan Uzgel, "Turkey and the Mediterranean Imbroglio: The Story of an Aspiring Regional Power", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, November 2020.
[29] See "Policy of Zero Problems with Our Neighbours", Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, n.d.
[30] See Mesut Yeğen, "The Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey: Genesis, Evolution and Prospects", Istanbul Şehir University, May 2015.
[31] Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, January 2021.

in a referendum. Greece backed Nicosia's accession and also supported Turkey's EU aspirations.[32]

Still, the settlement plan ultimately failed. In their own referendum, Greek Cypriots rejected the Annan Plan; nevertheless, the Republic of Cyprus joined the EU in 2004.[33] The Turkish foreign ministry warned the EU that the Greek Cypriots did not have "authority to represent the whole of Cyprus or the Turkish Cypriots".[34] Leaders in Ankara were also disturbed that the EU failed to fulfil its promises to increase aid and start trade with the de facto Turkish Cypriot entity following the Turkish Cypriot vote in favour of reunification in 2004. (EU leaders at the time had pledged to "put an end to the isolation of the Turkish Cypriot community".[35]) Despite these disappointments, Erdoğan's AK Party government started its own EU accession negotiations in 2005.[36]

The unresolved feud over Cyprus fed maritime disputes between Turkey and Greece, and vice versa. Turkey does not recognise the Republic of Cyprus and holds that it cannot enter delimitation agreements or exploit natural resources in the eastern Mediterranean without sharing revenues with the de facto republic in the north. Turkish officials say they began voicing concerns about the rights of Turkish Cypriots when Cyprus signed its first maritime delimitation deal with Egypt in 2003.[37] After its EU accession, the Republic of Cyprus went on to sign new delimitation deals, with Lebanon in 2007 and Israel in 2010.[38] These all became sources of friction with Ankara.

Turkey also grew embittered by the influence that Greek Cypriots gained over the EU's approach to Turkey. "European countries, in addition to missing opportunities for diplomacy, gave in to the spoiled actions of Greece and the Greek Cypriot administration", Erdoğan said in November 2020, on the anniversary of the northern de

[32] "Greece was expecting that in return for its positive stance on Turkey's EU aspirations, it would gain the decoupling of Cyprus' accession to the EU from the prerequisite of a settlement to the Cyprus problem. Equally important was the strong belief of the political elites in Greece that Turkey's Europeanization would build trust and would result in the peaceful resolution of bilateral problems and the full normalization of Greek-Turkish relations". "Greek-Turkish Relations and the Cyprus Dispute: Impact on Turkey-EU Scenarios", FEUTURE, December 2018.

[33] Senior EU diplomats and officials sometimes express regret for the decision to admit the Republic of Cyprus. Crisis Group interviews, EU officials, October 2020-March 2021.

[34] "Press Release Regarding the EU Enlargement, 1 May 2004", Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

[35] "2576th Council Meeting – General Affairs – Luxembourg", press statement, European Commission, 26 April 2004. See also Crisis Group Europe Report N°171, *The Cyprus Stalemate: What Next?*, 8 March 2006. Erdoğan, then prime minister, said: "As the guarantor country, we did in Cyprus what we had to do. You asked for support for the Annan Plan, we supported it. The [Turkish side in Cyprus] said yes to the Annan Plan, and the Greek side said no. You rewarded them despite they said no, and you punished the side that said yes. Until the isolation of the [de facto northern republic] is annulled, we will never step back regarding the airports and the ports. Everyone should know that. If the negotiations [between Turkey and the EU] are interrupted, we do not care". "Erdoğan's reaction on Cyprus", *Milliyet*, 17 June 2006 (Turkish).

[36] "Turkey", European Council website, n.d.

[37] Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, September 2020. See also the presentation by Ambassador Çağatay Erciyes, director general for bilateral political and maritime-aviation-border affairs, titled "Addressing the East Mediterranean Maritime Dispute and Unilateral Activities: Factual Background and International Law and Turkish Standpoint", 9 December 2019.

[38] See the delimitation agreements at the website of the UN Office of Legal Affairs. Lebanon signed but did not ratify the agreement.

facto republic's establishment.[39] Turkish officials argue that Brussels is partial to the positions of the two EU members involved in the matter, namely Nicosia and Athens; they also hold that maritime delimitation is not an EU competence.[40]

For years, Turkish officials say, their efforts to draw attention to what Ankara saw as unfair actions by the Republic of Cyprus were ignored.[41] Over time, they found increasing reason for concern. After the discovery of gas off the Cyprus coast, international energy majors began exploration in 2011, picking up pace after 2016, amid excitement that the region might prove an alternative to Russian pipeline gas for Europe.[42] Meanwhile, efforts to reunify the island went nowhere, with the last round of attempts ending in failure in 2017. "We said this is going to lead to problems. The island is still divided: the EU was silent", a Turkish official said. "We had to do something".[43] Ankara acquired research and drilling ships and sent them – often with naval escorts – into contested waters both north east and west of Cyprus.[44] "The message was: 'If you try to go ahead with exploration and a pipeline without including Turkey, you won't be able to utilise hydrocarbon resources and you will have the constant threat of your neighbour'", the same official said.[45]

Against this backdrop, and particularly after the 2016 coup attempt, Erdoğan and his AK Party increasingly relied on the support of nationalists in parliament and among state cadres. This nationalist turn empowered people who had long opposed Erdoğan's tentative attempts at diplomacy with traditional foes. These politicians and bureaucrats, who catapulted to positions of power after the coup attempt, believe Ankara's compromising stances in earlier years led to Turkey's interests being ignored and emboldened Cyprus and Greece.[46] In the words of a Turkish official: "They turned to us and said, 'We told you so'".[47] With the AK Party's formal alliance with

[39] "President Erdoğan: An unfair equation in the eastern Mediterranean cannot produce peace and stability", Anadolu Ajansı, 15 November 2020 (Turkish).

[40] "Sea is not like land. The EU doesn't have jurisdiction", a Turkish official complained. Furthermore, Turkey asserts its right under international law to engage in seismic exploration in contested EEZs because – unlike drilling – prospecting does no permanent environmental damage. So, when the European Council issues statements condemning the actions of Turkish seismic research vessels, such as the *Oruç Reis'* movements near Kastellorizo, Ankara sees the body as siding with Greek maximalist claims. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, September 2020-January 2021. Also see Sinan Ülgen, "Whose Sea? The EU's Role in the Eastern Mediterranean – A View from Turkey", Institut Montaigne, 13 October 2020.

[41] Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Istanbul, January 2021.

[42] From 2007 onward, the Republic of Cyprus issued tenders to hand out exploration licences to international energy companies including Eni (Italy), Exxon and Noble (Chevron) (U.S.), Total (France), Kogas (South Korea), Qatar Petroleum and Delek (Israel). "The Cyprus Hydrocarbons Issue: Context, Positions and Future Scenarios", op. cit.

[43] Crisis Group telephone interview, September 2020.

[44] Since late 2012, Turkey has bought three drilling vessels (*Fatih*, *Yavuz* and *Kanuni*). Ankara also bought one seismic exploration vessel (*Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa*) and built a second (*Oruç Reis*). Except for the *Kanuni*, which Ankara deployed for energy exploration in the Black Sea in early 2020, it appears that all these ships have surveyed areas around Cyprus, starting with *Barbaros Hayreeddin Paşa* in 2014, or elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean. Based on Crisis Group review of Turkish media.

[45] Crisis Group telephone interview, September 2020.

[46] Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, January 2021. Also see "All About Blue Homeland | Cihat Yaycı | PANKUŞ-291", video, YouTube, 6 September 2020 (Turkish); also see Cihat Yaycı, *Libya is Turkey's Sea Neighbour* (Istanbul, 2020), p. 40 (Turkish).

[47] Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Istanbul, January 2021.

the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in early 2018, the government moved to a yet harder line in its eastern Mediterranean policy.

B. *A Convergence of Adversaries*

Ankara has also felt increasingly threatened by what it sees as a hostile axis seeking to cage it into a small corner of the Mediterranean. Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, it has been trying to counter what it views as a campaign by the UAE, Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia to blunt Turkish influence in the Middle East and North Africa.[48] It sees a worrying convergence between these actors and Greece, the Republic of Cyprus and Israel.[49] Plans by the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, Israel and Greece to run a 1,900km pipeline to Europe for gas extracted from the eastern Mediterranean, bypassing Turkey, seemed to justify these fears.[50] The formation of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum – including the above four countries plus Italy, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan – confirmed them. The U.S. backed the forum, and France has shown interest in joining.

Turkey began looking for ways to counter developments that it saw as boxing it in. One was readiness to go toe to toe with NATO allies such as Greece and France on the seas. In 2019, Ankara sent seismic research vessels into waters claimed by the Republic of Cyprus, also with naval escorts, provoking EU sanctions on two executives of Turkey's state-owned energy firm. Another was military intervention abroad: Turkey saw Libya as the only remaining eastern Mediterranean littoral state with which it had friendly ties. In 2019, Ankara threw its weight behind Libya's UN-backed government of Prime Minister Faiez Serraj to prevent Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's rival forces from toppling him.[51] Ankara signed a security cooperation deal and a maritime agreement with Tripoli on the same day in November 2019.[52]

No country other than Libya accepts the legality of Turkey's delimitation scheme, but from Ankara's point of view, it achieves key objectives.[53] In the short term, it allows Ankara to delay through lawsuits (and therefore raise the cost of) the construction of the eastern Mediterranean natural gas pipeline that Greece, Israel and the Republic of Cyprus want to develop. In the long term, it lays the groundwork for pressing Egypt and Israel to backtrack on agreements for the delimitation of EEZs they reached with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus. Ankara hopes that these coun-

[48] For background, see Joost Hiltermann, "Tackling the MENA Region's Intersecting Conflicts", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 February 2018.

[49] Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Istanbul and Ankara, September 2020-March 2021.

[50] Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, December 2020. "Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline Project", NS Energy website, n.d.

[51] Crisis Group Europe Report N°257, *Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters*, 30 April 2020. The text of the memorandum, which was ratified on 5 December 2019, is available in Turkish, Arabic and English on the Turkish parliament's website.

[52] In 2011, the Arab uprisings interrupted Turkish diplomatic efforts to conclude agreements with Muammar al-Qaddafi's Libya and Husni Mubarak's Egypt that would have staked Ankara's own claims. Crisis Group Report, *Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters*, op. cit.

[53] Ankara submitted the map, which establishes an 18.6-nautical mile (35km) maritime boundary between Turkey and Libya, to the UN. Most of the Turkish EEZ and part of the Libyan EEZ claimed under the agreement overlap with waters Athens considers part of its continental shelf generated by a number of Greek islands. "Turkey, Libya maritime deal sent to UN: Erdogan", Anadolu Agency, 7 December 2019.

tries would then sign new maritime delimitation agreements with Turkey, which would grant them larger areas of jurisdiction than their existing deals do, at the expense of Athens and Nicosia's claims.

Some officials in Ankara presented the maritime agreement with Libya as part of a relatively new conception of national defence, in which the Turkish "homeland" (*vatan*) encompasses not only land but also sea, or the "blue homeland" (*mavi vatan*).[54] Although this concept appears in domestic debates, state officials say it is not official policy.[55] The admiral who years ago coined this concept, Cem Gürdeniz, argued in August 2020 that it was a necessary response to Greece, which was "getting backing from the anti-Turkey approach of the U.S. and EU in the eastern Mediterranean, Syria and Libya".[56] Hardliners see evidence of such an approach in a 2004 map prepared by two Spanish academics that extrapolates EEZs based on littoral states' potential claims, which shows Turkey's Mediterranean access restricted to the Gulf of Antalya and illustrates Ankara's worst-case scenario.[57] Once referenced only among Turkish Eurosceptics, the so-called Seville map is increasingly cited by officials as a source of disquiet – though both Athens and Brussels deny endorsing it.[58] "This comes up again and again from the Turkish side", an EU official said.[59]

While Ankara lays claim under its deal with Libya to maritime areas west of the 28th meridian, it has refrained from gas exploration or exploitation there. Before

[54] The concept prescribes that Turkey exercise greater control over the three seas that surround it – the Aegean, Black and Mediterranean – to secure trade routes and natural resources, including fish and seabed mineral deposits.

[55] Crisis Group interview, March 2021. Foreign ministry representatives say the "blue homeland" maps reflect the aspirations of certain circles but not the state's formal position on the areas over which it claims sovereignty. They say the official position is represented by the amended map Turkey submitted to the UN Secretary-General and Secretariat after signing its agreement with Tripoli on 30 September 2020. See tweet by Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, @mevlutcavusoglu, Turkish foreign minister, 4:48pm, 1 October 2020.

[56] Cem Gürdeniz, "The Turkish nations' response to imperialism on the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Sèvres: Blue Homeland", *Cumhuriyet*, 13 August 2020 (Turkish).

[57] Nationalist and pro-government Turkish outlets have since 2018 increasingly referenced the map as epitomising attempts to trap Turkey in a small corner of the eastern Mediterranean. "What is the Seville map?", *Yeniçağ*, 22 September 2020 (Turkish). The "Seville map" is named after the university where the two Spanish academics who drafted it teach. The professors submitted their paper in 2004, and published it in 2006, as part of a study commissioned by the EU, which outlines the potential EEZs of littoral states by drawing the boundary at a point equidistant between eastern Greek islands (taking into account even the smallest ones, such as Megisti/Meis) and the Turkish coast. Juan Luis Suárez de Vivero and Juan Carlos Rodríguez Mateos, "Maritime Europe and EU Enlargement: A Geopolitical Perspective", *Marine Policy*, vol. 30 (2006), pp. 167-172; "The Seville map that challenges Turkey, Greece, the U.S. and the EU", Keep Talking Greece, 22 September 2020.

[58] In a September 2020 interview, for example, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu said: "[Greece] must give up the Seville map", referring to Greece's position as derived from a 2011 Greek law, but describing it through reference to the map. "Breaking news: Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu answers CNN Türk's questions", CNN Türk, 17 September 2020 (Turkish). Greece's position is codified in what is known as the "Maniatis Law", Law N°4001/2011 on hydrocarbon explorations. "Greek-Turkish dispute over the delimitation of the continental shelf", Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 June 2018. In answer to a question from the Turkish daily *Hürriyet*, the European Commission clarified the legal status of the "Seville map", stating that "external reports commissioned by institutions are not official documents of the EU and have no legal or political value for the EU". "Bad news for Greece from the EU: That map is invalid", *Hürriyet*, 20 August 2020 (Turkish).

[59] Crisis Group online interview, December 2020.

2019, Turkey had seen the 28th meridian as its de facto maritime border with Greece, stretching from its southern coastal town of Marmaris to Egypt's northern coast (west of Alexandria) and crossing the Greek island of Rhodes.[60] During the mid-2020 standoff, the *Oruç Reis* did not cross this meridian.[61] Hardliners like former Turkish Admiral Cihat Yaycı, for example, say Turkey should do so nonetheless: "Conducting exercises … [is] futile. To establish that these areas belong to us, the only way is to send seismic survey and drilling ships".[62] In April 2020, Turkey's state-owned energy company TPAO applied to obtain survey and drilling licences in new maritime areas to the west of this line.[63] Turkish officials say no decision has yet been made on whether they are likely to grant the licences.

C. *A Two-pronged Approach*

As of late 2020, Ankara's muscular foreign policy has come with diplomacy aimed at peeling away EU, Egyptian and Israeli support for Greece.[64] Erdoğan said in December 2020 that he sought to "turn a new page" in ties with EU and in January that exploratory talks with Greece "will herald a new era".[65] He promised human rights reforms – an area where EU criticism has caused friction – though prospects seem dim for meaningful progress.[66] Turkish officials say it is only a matter of time before ties with Cairo, severed since the coup deposing President Muhammad Morsi in 2013, improve; Egyptian officials play down the prospect.[67] In March, the Turkish foreign minister revived the possibility of a maritime deal with Egypt.[68] Turkey and Israel have also hinted at normalising relations, though big disagreements remain.[69] In December 2020, Turkey said Israel's hydrocarbon resources would most efficiently be traded to other markets via Turkey, and in March 2021 Israel's energy minister said

[60] For a list of Turkey-relevant UN documents, including submissions by Ankara, on maritime boundaries and delimitation, see the Turkey page of the UN Division of Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea website.

[61] Crisis Group tracking of *Oruç Reis* movements over the middle months of 2020. See tweets by Berkay Mandıracı, @BerkayMANDIRACI, Crisis Group analyst, 6:00am, 26 November 2020. For 2012 licensing area, see the map attached to the Turkish Council of Ministers decision dated 27 April 2012. Crisis Group telephone interview, Greek diplomat, March 2, 2020.

[62] Yaycı resigned in May 2020, upon being appointed to another post, saying his new position would in effect have left him idle, with no responsibility in the domain to which he had dedicated his career. "Associate Professor Cihat Yaycı explained the recent developments in the East Med", video, YouTube, 7 December 2020 (Turkish). Some Turkish experts suggest that he was pushed out as part of a power struggle with top commanders or in a bid by Ankara to distance itself from the "blue homeland" concept. "The backdrop of Cihat Yaycı's resignation", Habertürk, 18 May 2020 (Turkish).

[63] "TPAO has applied for new drilling licenses in the Eastern Mediterranean! The ministry shared a map", *Hürriyet*, 2 June 2020 (Turkish).

[64] Crisis Group telephone interview, September 2020.

[65] "Turkey hopes to turn new page with U.S. and EU in 2021, Erdogan says", Reuters, 23 December 2020; "Erdogan hopes new Turkey-Greece talks will herald new era", Reuters, 12 January 2021.

[66] "President Erdoğan: We hope to turn a new page with the USA and Europe", NTV, 13 December 2020 (Turkish); Speech titled "The uncertainty that has heightened with Brexit will be dissipated with Turkey taking its rightful place in the European family", Turkish Presidency website, 12 January 2021.

[67] "Process for second S-400 batteries continues, Bloomberg, 8 March 2021 (Turkish); "In the face of isolation, Erdogan reaches out to Egypt", Voice of America, 9 March 2021.

[68] Ankara said Cairo had respected Turkey's continental shelf claims in announcing new exploration bids. "Turkey says it may negotiate maritime demarcation with Egypt", Reuters, 3 March 2021.

[69] "Israel needs a reset with Turkey to contain Iran", *Haaretz*, 24 March 2021.

the Israelis would like to see Turkey in the East Mediterranean Gas Forum.[70] Turkey has also made overtures to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.[71]

The change of tack appears to be driven in part by economic worries. With support in the polls slipping, Erdoğan's ruling coalition is balancing such concerns against the foreign policy sensitivities of nationalist voters, whom some opposition parties are also vying for. Amid the blow dealt by pandemic restrictions and the lira's nose dive, most polls show that combined support for the AK Party and its ally, the MHP, has fallen below 50 per cent.[72] A majority of Turks see "making ends meet/unemployment" as the country's most pressing problems.[73] Driven by economic concerns, the public's view of the EU is improving, with support for EU membership well above 50 per cent throughout 2019 and 2020.[74] The AK Party's defeat in Turkey's three largest cities in 2019 municipal elections highlighted the challenge ahead of presidential and general elections scheduled for 2023. Faced with these problems, the government is keener to maintain European direct investment, to attract European tourists and to upgrade its customs union with the EU.[75]

A fault line has emerged within Turkish officialdom between those for and those against salvaging relations with the West; among the former, some believe that tensions with Greece risk spoiling the effort. "Some nationalist circles want to reorient Turkey away from the West, but there are others in the government and state who are pro-NATO and want to preserve Euro-Atlantic links", said a pro-Western veteran of

[70] "After Egypt now Israel: We are ready to cooperate with Turkey, *Star*, 9 March 2021 (Turkish); "Salient Turkey statement from Netenyahu", *Şalom*, 11 March 2021 (Turkish).

[71] "Turkey, Saudi Arabia set to have further dialogue: Turkish foreign minister", Anadolu Agency, 11 May 2021; "UAE-Turkey: Emirati foreign minister calls Turkish counterpart for first time in five years", *Middle East Eye*, 23 April 2021.

[72] "Average of sixteen polls: AKP at 36.3, MHP at 9.6, CHP at 24.8", *Diken*, 2 March 2021 (Turkish); "With poll support dropping, Erdogan's party looks to change Turkish election law: officials", Reuters, 2 March 2021. According to a February 2021 survey by a polling company close to the government, the ruling alliance's support stood at just over 52 per cent. "Optimar's latest election poll: The people's alliance passes 52 per cent", Haber 7, 7 February 2021 (Turkish).

[73] To this question, 15.3 per cent said "fighting the pandemic", 10.4 per cent said "terror and security", 9 per cent "education" and 3 per cent "a new constitution". A further 4.2 per cent had "no idea/no response". "Turkey's Pulse", MetroPoll Strategic and Social Research, February 2021. In a 2020 poll, when asked which country posed the biggest threat to Turkey, respondents ranked Greece fourth after the U.S., Israel and Russia. "Dimensions of Polarisation in Turkey – 2020", TurkuazLab, December 2020. A survey conducted before tensions rose in July 2020 asked whether or not Greece presented a threat: 58.9 per cent of the Turks said yes. "Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy", Kadir Has University, June 2020.

[74] "Support for EU membership reaches 60 per cent", *Diken*, 7 February 2020 (Turkish); "Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy", op. cit. In a poll conducted in April-May 2019, around 75 per cent of those supportive of Turkey's EU accession said they thought the EU would bring prosperity and economic development. "The Turkish Public's Perceptions on Europe and Support for the European Union 2019", Economic Development Foundation, October 2019 (Turkish).

[75] European direct investment accounts for over 60 per cent of Turkey's total on average, while Europeans make up more than half the tourists visiting Turkey. In 2019, almost twenty million Europeans visited Turkey. "FDI Inflows to Turkey", Investment Office of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. Data on foreign tourists visiting Turkey shared by the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies. In 2019, foreign direct investments in Turkey totalled around $9 billion, a more than 50 per cent drop from $19 billion back in 2015. "Foreign Direct Investment, Net Inflows (BoP, Current US$) – Turkey", World Bank Database, n.d.

debates on this issue.[76] Officials seeking better ties with EU capitals and Washington say improved relations would undercut support for Greece that they believe has emboldened Athens and made it more reluctant to compromise.[77] Turkish officials complain of "hostile" statements by Athens painting Turkey as "provocative" or "the enemy".[78]

Yet maximalist positions still dominate the public discussion, with former military figures calling for Turkey to build bases on contested islets and rocks in the Aegean.[79] As a Turkish think-tank representative told Crisis Group: "Segments of the state will stand against any compromise and they are pumping their narrative into society".[80] Some figures influential in shaping public debate go as far as to say Turkey has rights over a greater sweep of sea even than envisioned by the "blue homeland" maps, including to the north and south of Crete.[81] A retired Turkish staff colonel vocal on these issues says Greece has occupied seventeen islands since the AK Party came to power and Turkey should reclaim them.[82] More moderate voices, who say the "blue homeland" concept hinders efforts to reach a settlement with Greece, are shunned from state media outlets and labelled traitors on social media.[83] Main opposition parties blame the AK Party for Turkey's soured relations with the U.S., EU, Egypt and Israel but call on the government to stand its ground in talks with Greece, framing possible concessions as "submission".[84]

[76] Turkish speaker, "The Eastern Mediterranean as a Contested Maritime Space", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute online event, 28 September 2020.

[77] Crisis Group interview, Turkish officials, January and March 2021.

[78] Crisis Group correspondence, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, April 2021.

[79] Retired Turkish Staff Colonel Ümit Yalım, for instance, claims that Greece has militarised 21 of the 23 islands incrementally since the 1960s. "We need to open military bases in the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean", *Milli Gazete*, 6 July 2020 (Turkish). Yalım also claims that Greece is occupying islands that were not mentioned in the 1913 London Treaty and 1923 Lausanne Treaty dictating which islands Turkey needs to hand over to Greece – as well as others that Turkey surrendered to Italy (which Italy, he claims, later illegally handed over to Greece) in the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty. He complains that the West has ignored Turkey's concerns about demilitarisation, adding that the only way to respond effectively is in kind, such as by building up militarily in the Aegean, including on islands that are not covered by treaties but where Turkey has sovereign rights. "Doğu Akdeniz krizinin sorumluları Cihat Yaycı, Cem Gürdeniz ve Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu", video, YouTube, 6 September 2020. See also "We need to open military bases in the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean", op. cit.

[80] Crisis Group online interview, September 2020.

[81] Ümit Yalım, "Legal Status of Aegean Islands", 21st Century Turkey Institute, 12 November 2018 (Turkish).

[82] "Ümit Yalım: Isn't this part of our homeland?", *Sözcü*, 5 October 2020 (Turkish).

[83] In a September 2020 interview, former Admiral Cihat Yaycı, who advocates the *mavi vatan* approach, said: "I don't think those contradicting *mavi vatan* are Turks. They are funded by the EU, by Turkey's foes, Greek, Greek Cypriot lobbies. … I can say they are at best ignorant but going further are traitors". See "All About Blue Homeland | Cihat Yaycı | PANKUŞ-291", op. cit. "People who have opinions that contradict the 'blue homeland' concept or criticise Turkey's agreement with Libya are deemed either ignorant or traitors", a Turkish maritime expert said. Crisis Group online interview, November 2020.

[84] The main opposition party CHP and second most popular opposition party IYI regularly delivered harsh messages warning Erdoğan not to compromise on the eastern Mediterranean or the Aegean. Crisis Group review of statements made by senior CHP and IYI party figures from January 2020 to February 2021. "Parliament supports government's gas drilling activities in east Med Sea", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 19 July 2019. See CHP spokesperson Faik Öztrak's statement to the press, broadcast on the party's YouTube channel: "Greece is aware of Turkey's diplomatic loneliness. It aspires again to accomplish its long-lasting empty dreams". Video, YouTube, 4 September 2020.

In the face of long-term geostrategic concerns and short-term public opinion considerations, Ankara is likely to continue with the two-pronged approach to Turkey's disputes in the Mediterranean – balancing muscle flexing with diplomacy. Overtures to the West do not necessarily mean a softening of Turkey's policies toward Greece or the Republic of Cyprus. Ankara sees the latter as linked to the core of its sovereignty and political parties of almost all stripes are united around fairly hawkish stances. Moreover, until Turkey is included in a regional platform, it is likely to continue hydrocarbon exploration to highlight the unsustainability of the status quo, while seeking arrangements with Egypt and Israel to strengthen its hand. At the same time, even if its posture remains assertive, it will also try to maintain talks with Greece to de-escalate tensions. In short, Erdoğan will want to keep his options open, to see which route leads to more domestic political and strategic wins, including with regard to Cyprus.

IV. The View from Greece

Uncertain about Turkey's endgame, the government of Prime Minister Mitsotakis is preparing for the worst by bolstering its military, while warily engaging in talks that it has little faith will bear fruit. It has doubled down on a strategy of strengthening international alliances with two goals in mind: deterring Turkey's assertive military posturing and countering a unilateral revision of the status quo by Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean, whether through gas exploration or delimitation deals like that with Libya.[85]

In August 2020, as the *Oruç Reis* charted a course toward disputed waters, Greek officials rushed back from island holidays to decry what they described as gunboat tactics serving a revisionist, neo-Ottoman expansionist agenda stretching from the South Caucasus to Libya.[86] In the Greek public's eye, such fears were symbolised by Turkey's reopening, in late July 2020, for Islamic prayer of Hagia Sophia – once a Greek Orthodox basilica and, since 1934, a state-run museum.[87] "Turkey has moved away from its older, previous foreign policy motto: 'zero problems with our neighbours'; now, it's closer to 'zero neighbours without problems'", quipped National Defence Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos.[88] Many in Athens worry that because, for Ankara, resolving the maritime dispute ranks lower than other priorities, it has no incentive to do so without other powers raising the stakes.[89]

For Mitsotakis, officials say, it was Turkey's decision to lift border controls on migrants seeking to cross into the EU in March 2020 that shifted his calculus to being ready to respond militarily.[90] Mitsotakis had just met with Erdoğan on the sidelines of a NATO summit in London in December 2019, paving the way for political consultations the next January and defence ministry discussions in February. Greek officials saw the migrant decision as a betrayal, calling it an invasion and an act of hybrid warfare.[91] "It really was a wake-up call", said a veteran Greek expert.[92] Already in January 2020, the *Oruç Reis* had entered disputed waters south east of Karpathos for around 24 hours; Greek officials put the military on high alert when, in July, Turkey issued a navigational telex warning of further exploration.[93]

Greece is flexing its own military muscle. In 2020, the government raised its defence spending from €3.4 to €5.5 billion after years of cuts due to austerity mea-

[85] "Dendias says Greece will not accept a fait accompli in East Med", *Ekathimerini*, 11 August 2020.
[86] Crisis Group online interviews, Greek officials, lawmakers and academics, September 2020-March 2021.
[87] Crisis Group interview, Greek diplomat, 16 March 2020. "Statement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, N. Dendias, after the End of His Meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Spain, Arancha González Laya", Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28 July 2020 (Greek).
[88] "A Conversation with Greek Minister of Defence Nikos Panagiotopoulos", German Marshall Fund, 29 October 2020.
[89] Crisis Group online interview, Georgios Katrougalos, Syriza MP and former Greek foreign minister, 28 October 2020.
[90] Crisis Group interviews, Greek academics, officials and diplomats, October 2020-March 2021.
[91] "A Conversation with Greek Minister of Defence Nikos Panagiotopoulos", op. cit.
[92] Crisis Group online interview, Greek academic based in Turkey, 8 September 2020.
[93] "Annus horribilis: Key Greek-Turkish developments in 2020", Al Jazeera, 23 December 2020.

sures.[94] Athens is refurbishing and buying new weapons, warplanes and ships, including eighteen French Rafale fighter jets, U.S. anti-submarine MH-60 helicopters and German torpedoes.[95] The army is recruiting more men for longer, and Athens plans to construct new and expanded military bases, including one that was used by U.S. and NATO forces at Souda Bay in Crete.[96]

Meanwhile, Greece has stepped up its own diplomatic overtures, which have found a receptive audience, as the Libyan conflict has aggravated regional rivalries. "To be honest, we have been feasting on it", a Greek diplomat admitted.[97] Turkey's deteriorating ties with Egypt and Israel have been a catalyst for Greece's own blossoming cooperation with the two. More recently, these dynamics helped Athens build new ties with the United Arab Emirates, with which it signed a defence accord in 2020, and Saudi Arabia, which sent six F-15C aircraft to join Greek military exercises in Crete in March.[98] Describing the atmosphere at a Philia (Friendship) Forum hosted in Athens with participants from the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, France and the UAE, another Greek diplomat said: "The most vocal voices against Turkey were the Arab countries, not us: they were basically thundering".[99] (Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have found themselves at odds with Turkey over Ankara's backing of the Muslim Brotherhood and close ties to Qatar. Their interests also clash with Turkey's in the Horn of Africa. [100])

Athens capitalised on shared misgivings about Ankara's 2019 maritime deal with Tripoli to delimit its maritime boundary with other littoral states. With Italy, it agreed on an EEZ in the Ionian Sea.[101] A visit by Dendias to Cairo in June 2020 kick-started long-stalled negotiations, culminating in a partial agreement on the Greek-Egyptian maritime border in August.[102] The deal's timing, which disrupted German efforts to restart exploratory talks, frustrated EU allies, but Greek officials say they had no choice but to act on Cairo's openness to a proposal they had been pushing for since 2009.[103] The two deals entailed compromises from Athens, sparking criticism from

[94] "Significant increase to the Greek armaments budget even with such delay", Defence Point, 24 November 2020 (Greek); "Greece to pay 2.3 bln euros for 18 French Rafale fighter jets", *Ekathimerini*, 17 December 2020.

[95] It will also lease Heron unmanned aerial vehicles from Israel and wants to buy U.S. Arleigh Burke-class destroyers. "Thanos Dokos: Greek national security: An assessment and challenges", *Ekathimerini*, 25 January 2021; "Greece wants arms embargo on Turkey", *Ekathimerini*, 7 December 2020.

[96] "Greece plans to create second military base in Crete", *Middle East Monitor*, 30 September 2020; "Two tiny Greek islands now have important military role in curbing Turkish naval aggression", *Greek City Times*, 6 November 2020.

[97] Crisis Group interview, Greek diplomat, March 2021.

[98] "Information note on the prime minister's visit to Abu Dhabi and the agreements signed", Greek Prime Ministry, 18 November 2020 (Greek); Raúl Redondo, "Emirates supports Arab-European alliance against Turkish expansionism in the Mediterranean", Atalayar, 17 June 2020; "Dendias: 'Greece and UAE relations are strategic – I hope Turkey will abandon illegal activities'", *Iefimerida*, 25 September 2020 (Greek); "Saudi air force arrives in Crete for joint military exercises", *Greek City Times*, 15 March 2021.

[99] Crisis Group telephone interview, Greek diplomat, March 2021.

[100] See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°206, *Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact*, 19 September 2019.

[101] "Greece, Italy sign accord on maritime zones in Ionian Sea", Reuters, 9 June 2020.

[102] "Greece-Egypt agree on sea zones", *Ta Nea*, 6 August 2020 (Greek).

[103] Crisis Group interviews, Greek officials and academics, September 2020-March 2021.

opposition parties.[104] Then, in October 2020, Greece agreed to settle its boundary dispute with Albania at the ICJ.[105] Most recently, Mitsotakis and officials in the Tripoli government exchanged official visits in which they agreed to restart talks about maritime delimitation in spite of Libya's deal with Turkey.[106]

Anger over Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 missiles (among other disagreements) has also led Washington to pivot strategically from Ankara to Athens, though Turkey retains an important role as a NATO ally and host to U.S. bases.[107] Despite apprehension among Greek officials over U.S. President Donald Trump's telephone diplomacy with Erdoğan, Athens and Washington signed a defence accord in October 2019.[108] When U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo travelled to the region in 2020, he snubbed Turkish officials on two separate occasions: in September, he visited the Republic of Cyprus after announcing a partial lifting of a 33-year U.S. arms embargo on Nicosia, and, in November, he met the Greek Orthodox patriarch in Istanbul but no Turkish officials.[109] Pompeo also used his final NATO meeting to sharply criticise Turkey over the S-400s – an issue that remains a thorn in U.S.-Turkey relations under President Biden.[110]

Washington sees Greece as at the heart of its efforts to facilitate regional energy cooperation, including via the East Mediterranean Gas Forum.[111] U.S. officials have long backed Greece's role in a series of energy projects that would weaken Russia's monopoly over the markets of south-eastern Europe and said gas finds in the eastern

[104] The leftist Syriza party called the deal "hasty", saying it set a dangerous precedent. The deal favours Egypt at the expense of Greece's longstanding claim that islands be given full and equal rights in assigning maritime zones and that the border be at the equidistant line between the two coastlines. The deal does not accord full rights to the potential boundary created by a Greek maritime zone from the eastern coastline of Rhodes and the Kastellorizo complex. "Legal analysis of the EEZ delimitation agreement between Greece and Egypt", Defence ReDefined, 11 August 2020 (Greek); "Egypt, Greece sign maritime deal to counter Libya-Turkey one", AP, 6 August 2020; "Party reactions to the Greece-Egypt deal", *To Vima*, 6 August 2020 (Greek).

[105] "Greece – Albania, EEZ through the Hague", *Kathimerini*, 23 October 2020 (Greek).

[106] "Mitsotakis: Resumption of Greece-Libya talks on delimitation of maritime zones", *Kathimerini*, 14 April 2021 (Greek); "Greece, Libya agree to restart talks on maritime zones", Anadolu Agency, 14 April 2021.

[107] George Pagoulatos and Katerina Sokou, "US-Greece Relations in the Biden Era: Why the Road to Rebuilding the Transatlantic Alliance Runs through Athens", Atlantic Council, 19 February 2021. See also, for example, then-Assistant Secretary of State Wess Mitchell's testimony to Congress in 2018, saying the U.S. was "cultivating Greece as an anchor of stability in the Mediterranean and Western Balkans". "Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress Second Session", 26 June, 2018.

[108] The accord included provisions for basing more U.S troops near the Turkish border, at Larissa, Alexandroupolis and Souda Bay. "MDCA signed – Basing rights in Stefanovikeio and Larissa for the U.S.", PtisiDiastima, 5 October 2019 (Greek); "U.S. Assistant Secretary of State in Athens and Nicosia", Euronews, 14 October 2020 (Greek).

[109] "Pompeo voices support for talks between Greece, Turkey", AP, 29 September 2020; "Travel to France, Turkey, Georgia, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia", U.S. Department of State, 13 November 2020.

[110] "In parting shot, Pompeo rebukes Turkey at NATO meeting", Reuters, 3 December 2020.

[111] The U.S. participated in Israel-Greece-Cyprus talks on energy cooperation, making it a "3+1", and in the East Mediterranean Gas Forum. Crisis Group interviews, former U.S. officials from Obama and Trump administrations, February-May 2021.

Mediterranean could contribute to this policy push.[112] "What we wanted to do was support energy as a proxy for other forms of collaboration," a senior U.S. official from the Trump era said. "The hypothesis was that it would have a halo effect in the political dimensions as well. I would suggest that we exceeded our expectations in terms of how this could kind of pick up".[113]

Biden has long been a proponent of stronger U.S. ties with Greece and strategic partnership with the Republic of Cyprus, but it remains to be seen how committed he will be to pursuing these policies during his presidency. Biden spoke to Mitsotakis on 25 March, nearly one month before calling Erdoğan, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said he would "continue to deepen ties between the U.S. and Greece, as well as Cyprus".[114] But the tilt toward Greece, marked by annual joint military exercises, will likely only go so far for fear of antagonising Turkey. "You can imagine a whole bunch of scenarios where we back Greece, but nobody wants to go that route", said a senior Trump administration official. "They come at a cost. You're going to escalate with Turkey. And do you want that?"[115]

As for the EU, while Mitsotakis has sought to make Greek priorities European ones when it comes to Turkey, Athens' push to threaten fresh economic sanctions and arms sales restrictions has met with mixed success among Turkey's largest trading partners.[116] Germany, Italy and Spain have commercial and security ties with Turkey.[117] Germany, along with the "Visegrad group" of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, also worries that Turkey could hit back by again allowing migrants into Europe.[118] "They've been traumatised by the migrant crisis", a Greek official complained. "They just say: 'We'll give you whatever you want'".[119] Others are wary of alienating a NATO ally that they wish to see better integrated with the bloc. "It's a problem for us how much Turkey-EU relations got complicated by Turkey-Greece", a European ambassador to Turkey said. "We want to park the Turkey-Greece and Cyprus issues".[120] An ambitious push by Mitsotakis to halt EU arms sales to Turkey at the peak of tensions in late 2020 went nowhere.[121] German Chancellor Angela Merkel

[112] These include the Trans Adriatic Pipeline, part of a network carrying gas from Azerbaijan to Europe; a floating liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility off the city of Alexandroupolis; and the Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria pipeline. Crisis Group online interviews, former senior U.S. officials, 12 February and 12 May 2021.

[113] Crisis Group online interview, former U.S. official, 13 May 2021.

[114] "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis of Greece", The White House, 25 March 2021; "US-Greece security relationship key to American interests in East Med, says Blinken", *Ekathimerini,* 22 January 2021.

[115] Crisis Group online interview, former senior U.S. official, 14 March 2021.

[116] In November 2019, the EU put in place a framework that made it possible to sanction individuals or entities responsible for or involved in unauthorised drilling for hydrocarbons in the eastern Mediterranean. In February 2020, the European Council added two persons from Turkey to the sanctions list. "Dendias again calls for sanctions against Turkey", *Ekathimerini*, 7 December 2020.

[117] Crisis Group online interviews, European officials, September 2020-March 2021.

[118] "Italian–Turkish Economic Relations: An Overview", Istituto Affari Internazionali, September 2020. Crisis Group online interview, EU member state official, November 2020.

[119] Crisis Group telephone interview, Greek diplomat, 2 March 2021.

[120] Crisis Group interview, Ankara, January 2021.

[121] Copies of an October 2020 letter from Dendias, framing the demand as an issue of EU solidarity, were sent to Germany, Spain and Italy. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute database, Italy, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands accounted for half of Turkey's arms imports from 2015 to 2019 – mostly aircraft, air defence systems, missiles and engines. "Greece's

rebuffed the demand, which focused on planned delivery of six German Type 214 submarines that Athens fears will tip the balance of power toward Turkey.[122]

While Mitsotakis has voiced disappointment with the lack of European consensus behind tougher measures to deter Turkey's sending ships to disputed waters, he has also stressed that sanctions are not an end in themselves.[123] While Greek officials want a credible threat of sanctions, they also pushed the EU at the March summit to offer carrots in the form of smoother trade ties, high-level dialogue and continued cooperation on migration, including the renewal of a 2016 deal in which the EU offered Turkey financial help to host migrants and enforce border controls.[124] "Only punishing Turkey would not lead to a good result", one official said.[125] In this respect, Athens differs from its most vocal supporters in the bloc – the Republic of Cyprus, Austria and France – who believe the softer touch may embolden Erdoğan.[126] "With the Turkey of Erdoğan, only a show of power can change things", an EU diplomat said, adding that not doing so would be read as weakness by other actors, such as Russia.[127]

France has deepened its strategic and defence cooperation with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, in part to guard French oil major Total's stake in seven parcels off the island, but primarily to express a set of disagreements with Turkey from Libya to the Sahel.[128] It sent warships and planes to participate in two Greek naval exercises in August and December 2020, and joined another in April 2021.[129] Recently, the French research vessel *L'Atalante* ventured south of Crete, west of the 28th meridian – an area, as noted above, claimed by both Greece and Turkey. The voyage, also replete with naval escort, drew a sharp reaction from Turkey, which dispatched its

call for an embargo on weapons sales to Turkey: a seminal step for the EU's collective defence identity?", Eliamep, 20 November 2020; "Greece asks EU countries to halt military exports to Turkey", *Ekathimerini*, 20 October 2020.

[122] "For us, it is a huge issue: they are really going to alter the balance of power and there will be only negative consequences", a Greek diplomat said. The 2009 deal would bring Turkey's total submarine fleet to eighteen and give it comparable technology to Greece's fleet of eleven submarines. "Merkel turns down Greece's call for EU arms embargo on Turkey", Anadolu Agency, 11 December 2020. Crisis Group telephone interview, Greek diplomat, March 2021. "Greek Deterrence of Turkey: Living to Fight Another Day", BESA Center, 2 October 2020.

[123] Mitsotakis said: "Europe usually takes one step at a time. … Sanctions are not an end in themselves, but the threat of sanctions is the best tool to pressure Turkey to change its behaviour". "Mitsotakis: First decisions made for Turkey – Why he compared the EU to an ocean liner", *Skai*, 11 December 2020 (Greek).

[124] Berkay Mandıracı, "Sharing the Burden: Revisiting the EU-Turkey Migration Deal", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 March 2020. Crisis Group online interviews, Greek officials, December 2020 and February 2021.

[125] Crisis Group online interview, Greek official, December 2020.

[126] Crisis Group interviews, EU diplomats, Brussels, November 2020-March 2021.

[127] Crisis Group interview, EU diplomat, September 2020.

[128] The Turkish navy blocked a drillship owned by Total's consortium partner Eni in 2018. France has had access to the Evangelos Florakis naval base in Cyprus since 2019 and plans to expand it to allow for docking larger warships. A new military cooperation deal between France and the Republic of Cyprus, which came into force in August 2020, calls for greater defence technology sharing and joint training. "Cyprus accuses Turkey of blocking ship again in gas exploration standoff", Reuters, 23 February 2018; "Cyprus-France defence cooperation agreement comes into force", Knews, 6 August 2020; "Cyprus, France reportedly agree on use of naval base", *Ekathimerini*, 16 May 2019.

[129] "France joins military exercises in east Mediterranean", Reuters, 26 August 2020; "UAE joins Greek, Egyptian naval exercise in eastern Mediterranean", *Al-Monitor*, 1 December 2020; "In Greece, the air force practices high intensity warfare", *Le Figaro*, 25 April 2021 (French).

own warships to the area.[130] Despite such manoeuvres, Greek and French diplomats say their positions in the EU Council are not fully aligned. Drawing a pointed contrast to Paris' position, one Greek official said: "We are not in competition with Turkey over regional influence".[131]

Greek officials walk an even finer line on aligning their stance with the Republic of Cyprus in EU deliberations.[132] Greek politicians have traditionally seen their dispute with Turkey as inseparable from the Greek Cypriots' problems with Ankara. More hawkish politicians portray any dialogue with Ankara as a betrayal of Nicosia as long as Turkey has troops on the island. That stance, strongest among the political old guard, has softened since Cyprus' 2004 accession to the EU, replaced with a more pragmatic approach partly in response to a younger electorate worried about other issues.[133] Mistotakis' government wants, as far as possible, to decouple its problems with Ankara from those of Nicosia, fearing the latter could act as a spoiler in efforts at de-escalation.[134] "The two things can be separated", a Greek diplomat said. "We are not going to wait for this [the Cyprus] issue to be resolved, or we will be waiting forever to move on Turkish-Greek relations".[135]

But perhaps one of the most important aspects of Mitsotakis' response has been what he has chosen not to do. Despite the pressure from dramatic media coverage – an element that has played a role in past escalations – officials are under orders "from the top" not to respond to bellicose Turkish rhetoric.[136] The Greek government sometimes issues its statements on any of its manifold disagreements with Turkey with an intentional delay, insiders say, in part because Greece feels it has the upper hand diplomatically or believe Turkish officials are playing to a domestic audience.[137] "We don't want to get into a declaratory war", a Greek diplomat said, while noting that the rhetorical restraint has come with a political cost. "We are even criticised for being too soft. It's becoming increasingly difficult to justify".[138]

While Mitsotakis is popular at home, he has come under attack for his approach in dealing with Turkey, particularly from his own party's influential nationalist wing.[139]

[130] "Turkey threatens French research ship inside Greek EEZ", *Greek City Times*, 19 April 2021; "Greek-French play failed", *Hürriyet*, 19 April 2021 (Turkish).

[131] Crisis Group telephone interview, Greek official, November 2020.

[132] Athens and Nicosia share such a similar stance on EU issues across the board that they have voted differently on only five occasions since July 2019. "Votes cast by Greece in the Council of Ministers of the EU", Vote Watch Europe website, n.d.

[133] Asked what issues counted most for them in elections, 31.3 per cent of respondents to a January survey by Marc replied, "the economy"; 16.9 per cent "the pandemic"; 14.4 per cent "the ideological and political positions of parties"; and only 14.1 per cent "national issues". "Marc poll: Economy is the first criterion for citizens' vote", Proto Thema, 14 January 2021 (Greek). Crisis Group interviews, Greek academics and former military officers, October 2020-March 2021.

[134] Crisis Group online interview, Greek academic based in Turkey, 2 October 2020.

[135] Crisis Group telephone interview, Greek official, 2 March 2021.

[136] During the 1996 tensions around Imia/Kardak, media coverage helped escalate a relatively mundane incident into a major crisis. Crisis Group online interviews, Greek officials, lawmakers and academics, September 2020-March 2021.

[137] Crisis Group online interview, Greek academic based in Turkey, 8 September 2020.

[138] Crisis Group telephone interview, Greek official, 2 March 2021.

[139] In a Pulse poll conducted after the mid-2020 Greek-Turkish tensions, 58 per cent of respondents approved of the government's actions in the dispute. The same poll also gave Mitsotakis a 46 per cent approval rating. "Poll: ND ahead of Syriza – Mitsotakis 45-46 per cent more suitable for prime min-

Former Prime Minister Antonis Samaras says the resumption of talks with Turkey undercut the threat of EU sanctions. "You do not appease the expansionist", he told the Greek daily *Kathimerini*.[140] The jostling within the governing party is likely to grow ahead of an uncertain election in 2023 to be held under a new proportional representation system. To a lesser extent, the left-wing opposition parties Syriza and Kinal have also been putting pressure on the government to take a tougher stance, with former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras calling for Greece to extend its territorial waters around Crete and Rhodes.[141] Although over half of Greeks (54.2 per cent) prefer dialogue to a harsher stance against Turkey, according to a recent poll, a significant 30 per cent want no talks at all.[142]

The public backlash to moderate statements by the Mitsotakis government illustrates the limits of its room to manoeuvre. In what a source close to de-escalation efforts dubbed a brave effort at dialogue, the prime minister broke from Greece's official line by referring to areas plied by Turkish research vessels as "non-delimited waters" in an op-ed.[143] All three opposition parties decried the comments as a concession, saying Mitsotakis had called into doubt the reach of Greece's potential EEZ.[144] A comparable outcry over comments perceived as contradicting the government's line that Greek naval ships had managed to stop the *Oruç Reis* from further exploration caused the resignation of the former chief national security adviser, Alexandros Diakopoulos.[145]

Deep scepticism over Turkey's commitment to dialogue also acts as a check on Greece. Many – including among Greece's EU allies – see Turkey's late 2020 change of tack as a ploy to delay sanctions. "We aren't very optimistic", a Greek diplomat said, adding that Athens expected Turkish officials to "push the margins as far as they can".[146] A series of actions by Ankara in the weeks between the October and December 2020 European Council meetings of EU leaders reinforced this suspicion. They included Turkey sending the *Oruç Reis* back out to sea; calling for a two-state solution in Cyprus; testing the Russian S-400 missile system; protesting German forces boarding a Turkish vessel as part of the EU's Irini mission; and entering a war of words with French President Emmanuel Macron in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in France.[147] As a result, Athens and its European allies want to see more than friendlier

ister", *To Vima*, 25 September 2020 (Greek). Crisis Group online interviews, Greek academic, 14 October 2020; Greek academic, 20 October 2020.

[140] "No one conducts dialogue with 'pirates'!", *Ta Nea*, 25 June 2020 (Greek); "Ex-PM Samaras tells Kathimerini deterrence is key to dealing with Turkey", *Ekathimerini*, 15 January 2021.

[141] "Tsipras opens issue of 12 miles for Crete, Kastellorizo, Rhodes, Karpathos, Kasos", CNN Greece, 13 October 2020 (Greek).

[142] "Poll: ND leads by 19.7 points ahead of Syriza", Proto Thema, 15 October 2020 (Greek).

[143] "Article by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis published in the Times, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Le Monde", Office of the Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic, 9 September 2020. Crisis Group interview, November 2020.

[144] "'Self-graying' by Mitsotakis: The area of Kastellorizo is 'non-delimited'", TVXS, 11 September 2020 (Greek).

[145] Diakopoulos said the *Oruç Reis* had conducted successful research in the contested areas during its first outings in late July and early August 2020. "Greek national security adviser resigns over Turkey remarks", AP, 19 August 2020; "Παραιτήθηκε ο Αλέξανδρος Διακόπουλος", *Capital*, 19 August 2020.

[146] Crisis Group telephone interview, Greek diplomat, 2 March 2021.

[147] Crisis Group online interviews, EU and EU member state officials, November and December 2020.

words from Turkey. "Ankara must stop sending us love letters and give us more concrete substance", one EU official quipped.[148]

As exploratory talks advance, some EU diplomats worry that Mitsotakis has little incentive to risk politically costly compromise.[149] Entertaining Turkey's request to discuss a partial or full demilitarisation of the eastern Aegean islands would, in the words of one expert, be "political suicide for any Greek government".[150] And on maritime rights, Greek officials see a ruling by the ICJ as the only face-saving option. "Kastellorizo has become emblematic", one diplomat said. "You can't try to sell compromise around that today after the year we experienced in 2020".[151]

[148] Crisis Group online interview, EU official, January 2021.

[149] "'We'll do much better': Greek PM sees tourism rebound in summer", Reuters, 4 February 2021.

[150] Crisis Group correspondence, Emmanuel Karagiannis, professor, Kings College London, 15 April 2021.

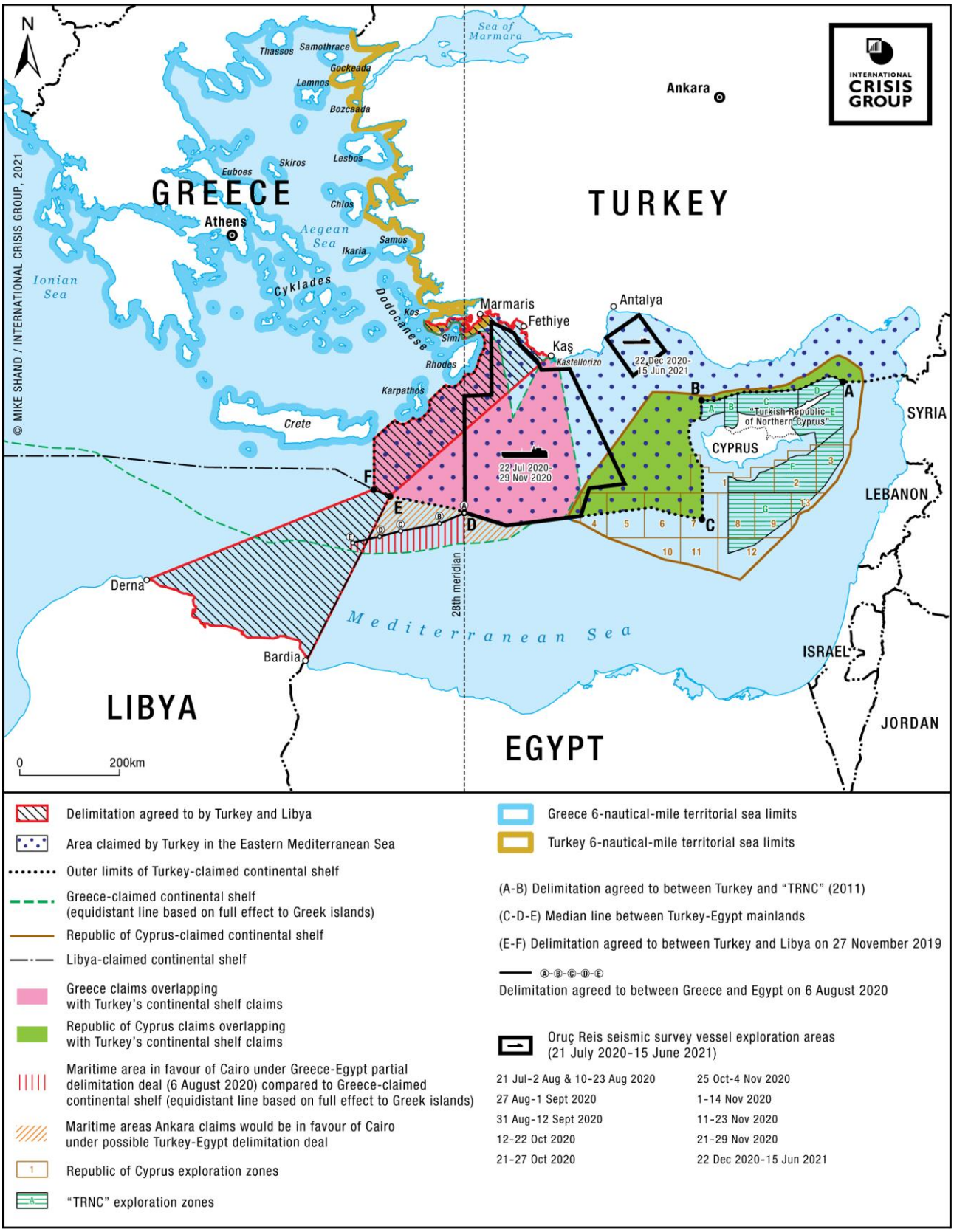
[151] Crisis Group interview, Greek diplomat, March 2021.

V. Conclusion

Greek-Turkish conflict in the eastern Mediterranean is unlikely but not entirely unthinkable. Fear of such an escalation, economic woes and concerns about damage to their respective ties with other regional powers have pushed Athens and Ankara back to exploratory talks for now. A united transatlantic front on the eastern Mediterranean would help motivate both Greece and Turkey to remain at the table. The talks offer a small opening to break out of the cycle of coercive diplomacy and military brinksmanship. Failure to keep them going, however, would likely result in a worse standoff than that in mid-2020, eroding what little trust exists between the two countries and strengthening the hand of those in both who would eschew diplomacy altogether.

May 2021

Appendix A: Map of Maritime Delimitation Areas



Appendix B: List of Issues in the Turkish-Greek Aegean Sea Dispute

Turkey's Position Source: Turkish Foreign ministry website
Greece's Position Source: Greek Foreign Ministry website

Issue	Turkey's Position	Greece's Position
Mode of settlement	All the issues listed below need to be tackled and resolved as a whole using any of the dispute resolution mechanisms outlined in Article 33 of the UN Charter, namely bilateral negotiations, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or any other peaceful measures of the two sides' choosing.	Only the delimitation of continental shelves (CS)/Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) issue is a bilateral problem. If bilateral negotiations cannot lead to a settlement on this matter, then referral to an international court like the International Court of Justice (ICJ) should be the next step.
1. Continental Shelf/Exclusive Economic Zone	• Delimitation and entitlement are not the same. The principle of equity/equitable solution is the rule for delimitation in international law. • According to international jurisprudence and state practice, islands are ignored or given limited effect in CS/EEZ delimitation if their location distorts equitable delimitation or if there are other special, relevant circumstances. Greek islands (i) cutting off Turkey's coastal projection; (ii) lying on the wrong side of the median line between mainlands; or (iii) with minimal coastal lengths compared to Turkey's mainland should not generate CS/EEZ. Delimitation should be effected based on the median line between the Greek and Turkish continental mainlands.	• All islands are entitled to a continental shelf and an EEZ as per the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea's (UNCLOS) Article 121, which entitles islands capable of sustaining human habitation and an economic activity to a CS/EEZ. • As long as a certain maritime area is "pending delimitation" between two states, the provisional delimitation boundary should be at the equidistant line between relevant coastlines, including islands. Greece's position to this end is enshrined in its national law, in Article 156 of Law 4001/2011 (Government Gazette A 179 – "For the operation of electricity and gas energy markets, for exploration, production and transmission networks of hydrocarbons and other provisions").
2. Territorial sea	• The Aegean is a semi-enclosed sea. Unlike the Black Sea, the presence of so many islands, especially in the close vicinity of the Turkish mainland, constitutes a special circumstance. Both sides currently apply a 6-nautical mile (nm) territorial sea breadth, which puts almost half of the Aegean Sea under the status of international waters and airspace. Turkey strongly opposes any unilateral extension of territorial sea limit beyond 6nm, as this would be detrimental to its vital and legitimate interests (security, military, economic, commercial, scientific) and would constitute an abuse of right under international law. Turkey therefore advocates maintaining the current 6nm limit, or even a 3nm limit, as applied in similar geographies (like Australia-Papua New Guinea). Upon the Greek parliament's decision authorising the Greek government to extend its territorial seas to 12nm (while UNCLOS reads "*up to* 12 nm"), the Turkish parliament adopted a motion on 8 June 1995 authorising the Turkish government to take all measures, including those that may be deemed necessary in the military field, for safeguarding and defending the vital interests of Turkey in the event of unilateral extension.	• It is Greek sovereign right "to proclaim a 12nm territorial sea". It has however maintained a 6nm territorial sea in the Aegean since 1936 and increased the breadth of its territorial waters to 12nm in the Ionian Sea only recently. When ratifying UNCLOS, Greece emphasised that it will decide according to its national interests "when and how" to apply the right to extend given to it by the Convention. Greece also protests that the Turkish *casus belli* of 1995 in the Aegean goes against the principles of the UN Charter, such as refraining from the threat or the use of force, peaceful resolution of disputes and good neighbourly relations and peaceful coexistence.
3. National	• Turkey does not recognise Greece's	• Greece, in 1931, proclaimed its na-

airspace limit	10nm national airspace implementation in the Aegean Sea while it applies a 6nm territorial sea limit. Turkey points to the fact that according to international law, the outer limits of national airspace should correspond to or not extend beyond the outer limits of territorial sea. This is a practice third countries also do not recognise. Turkey therefore urges Greece to align its national airspace limit to that of its territorial sea.	tional airspace within 10nm of its coast, including islands, as its sovereign right. Greece says that this outer limit is legal as it does not exceed UNCLOS' 12nm limit. Greece also claims that decades of toleration of this by Turkey constitutes tacit legal agreement.
4. Flight Information Region (FIR)	• Turkey argues that Greece abuses the FIR responsibility in the Aegean Sea by requesting flight plans for Turkish military aircraft flying in the Aegean's international airspace. It emphasises that under the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Convention, flight plans are applicable only to civilian aircraft and thus military aircraft flying in international airspace are under no such obligation. However, Greece claims that non-submission of flight plans by Turkish military aircraft constitutes a "violation of the Greek FIR". The concept of "violation of an FIR" does not exist, since FIR responsibility does not imply the recognition of sovereignty of that state over the international airspace. Turkey wishes to resolve this dispute through negotiation or a third-party mechanism, including the ICAO.	• ICAO delimited Athens' FIR in the European Regional Aviation Conferences of 1950, 1952 and 1958. Turkey was present at the conferences and raised no objections at the time. The Athens FIR covers the Greek territory as well as some "areas of international airspace". "In accordance with ICAO rules and international practice, Greece requests that all civil and military aircraft should submit flight plans prior to their entry into the Athens FIR for reasons of safety for civilian flights".
5. Search and rescue (SAR) regions to ensure safety of designated areas	• Aerial SAR and maritime SAR are not the same and do not need to correspond to each other. In any case, these are not sovereignty, but service areas to people in distress at sea. Both countries' maritime SARs, notified to the International Maritime Organization (IMO), are overlapping. Turkey advocates for a cooperation and coordination agreement with Greece on maritime SAR according to the 1979 Hamburg Convention, while Greece refrains from concluding such an agreement.	• The aerial SAR zone corresponds to the Athens FIR (see item 4), as per an ICAO Regional Air Navigation Agreement of 1952. • The marine SAR zone coincides also with the Athens FIR zone, stipulated in Greece's ratification of the 1979 Hamburg Convention, reflecting longstanding state practices, relevant recommendations by both the IMO and the ICAO, and geographical reality due to the multitude of Greek islands scattered across the Aegean, which allow for the most operationally effective search and rescue activities.
6. Demilitarisation of eastern Aegean islands	• The 1913 Paris Treaty, the 1914 Decision of the Six Powers, the 1923 Lausanne Treaty and the Annexed Convention of the Turkish Straits, the 1936 Montreux Convention and the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty clearly mention the demilitarised status of the eastern Aegean islands and the Dodecanese islands. • The 1923 Lausanne Treaty (in particular Article 12) reaffirms the 1914 Decision of the Six Powers, which states that Greece shall receive the north Aegean islands of Limnos, Samothrace, Lesvos, Chios, Samos and Ikaria provided they are kept demilitarised and describes the provisions to be respected, including a restriction on military presence and construction of military fortifications. The Annex to the Lausanne Treaty, the Convention of the Turkish Straits, imposed more restrictive demilitarised measures to Limnos and Samothrace, because of	• "The demilitarization of the Greek islands of Limnos and Samothrace along with the demilitarization of the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara and the Bosporus, and the Turkish Imbros (Gokceada), Tenedos (Bozcaada) and Rabbit Islands (Tavcan), was originally provided for in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty on the Straits. This was annulled by the 1936 Montreux Treaty, which, as it categorically stated in its preamble, replaced in its entirety the aforementioned Lausanne Treaty". Turkey recognised Greece's right to militarise Limnos and Samothrace in a letter sent to the Greek PM by the Turkish ambassador to Greece on 6 May 1936. In his address to the Turkish parliament in July 1936 then Turkish Foreign Minister Rüştü Aras reiterated this position. • For Mytilene, Chios, Samos and Ikaria,

	their presence near the Turkish Straits and, as such, their implications for Turkish national security. • The 1947 Paris Peace Treaty also ceded the Dodecanese islands from Italy to Greece on the basis that they should remain demilitarised. The islands were de facto administered by Italy following the Italian-Ottoman war of 1912 and were officially ceded by Turkey to Italy in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. • As such, Greek efforts since the 1960s to remilitarise these islands violate these binding international treaties with potential national security implications for Turkey. Turkey urges Greece to restore the demilitarised status or resolve the dispute through the ICJ.	the demilitarisation is limited to the commitment not to install naval bases and fortifications, but does not prohibit Greece from deploying a normal contingent according to the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. • For the Dodecanese islands, the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 says the islands should be demilitarised. In view of this: Turkey is not party to this treaty; Greece has only maintained a National Guard presence on the islands in accordance with the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE); This treaty came into force following an intervention from the Soviet Union at the end of World War II. The Cold War and the creation of rival military alliances (Warsaw Pact and NATO) created a situation where these provisions became incompatible with membership in the aforementioned rival military alliances. As a result of this changing context, just as with Greek islands, the demilitarised status ceased to apply to Italian islands, West Germany, Bulgaria, Romania, East Germany, Finland, and Hungary; • Finally, the various aforementioned treaties do not remove Greece's right to self-defence as expressed in Article 51 of the UN Charter. In light of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, the presence of the Turkish 4th Army in Izmir and the *casus belli,* there is sufficient reason for Turkey's action to warrant an increased Greek military presence in the Aegean.
7. "Grey Zones": sovereignty over numerous isles, islets, rocks in the Aegean Sea.	• The dispute emanates from differing interpretations related to the meaning, scope, intent and legal effect of the territorial provisions of a number of international instruments, mainly the Decision of the Six Powers of 1914, Lausanne Peace Treaty of 1923 (Articles 6, 12, 15 and 16) and Paris Treaty of 1947. Turkey has no objection to Greek sovereignty over islands explicitly given to Greece by international treaties but contests its sovereignty over those not explicitly mentioned in international legal texts. Turkey's position in this regard has been mainly based on perceived Greek attempts to change the status of some of these "geographical features" by opening them to artificial settlement. Greece passed laws and regulations to this end during the 1990s "that have no bearing from the point of international law". Turkey saw the laws as a move to cement Greek control over the entirety of the Aegean.	• Articles 12 and 15 of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 as well as Article 14 of the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 provide enough clarity to see which islands are under which country's sovereignty. Article 12 confirms the sovereignty of Greece over "the islands of the Aegean, other than the islands of Imbros, Tenedos and the Rabbit Islands". The same article also states: "Except where a provision to the contrary is contained in the present Treaty, the islands situated at less than three miles from the Asiatic coast remain under Turkey's sovereignty". Article 15 of the Lausanne Treaty confirms the sovereignty of Italy over the twelve main Dodecanese islands "and the islets dependent thereof". This is reaffirmed in Article 14 of the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947, in which Italy cedes to Greece the twelve main Dodecanese islands "as well as the adjacent islands".