

GREECE'S EMERGING SECURITY CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE OF GREEK-TURKISH RELATIONS

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SUMMARY

The analysis provides an overview of the two central security challenges Greece faces today, namely the energy rivalry with Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean/Libya, and the mass influx of refugees at the Greek-Turkish border, and discusses the prospects for a renewed Greek-Turkish détente.

The November 2019 Turkey-Libya maritime accord and the most recent mass influx of refugees at the Greek-Turkish border constitute the two central challenges to Greece's security today. Turkey's deal with the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli imperils Greek economic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and dashes the hopes for the construction of the East Mediterranean gas pipeline, whereas the refugee influx has significantly strained Greek-Turkish relations and has tarnished Greek (and European) normative standing over its harsh treatment of the refugees. Greece has already deployed major military forces to secure its eastern land border with Turkey and concurrently sponsors the rebel leader Khalifa Haftar in his anti-GNA offensive in Libya, but Athens's deterrent ability on its own is quite low.

The comparatively low deterrent ability is a recurring problem for which Greek defense doctrine has struggled to devise a remedy. Realizing the limits of internal balancing, for decades Greece has had to rely on Western support to offset the quantitative and qualitative superiority of Turkish military forces. However, with the EU presently in a state of strategic atrophy and very much divided over how to deal with Turkey, Greece's time-tested strategy of external balancing is also facing its limits. Under such circumstances

and given the comparatively meagre economic resources, long-term strategic competition with Turkey is not an option for Greece. Instead, Athens's security interests would actually be best served by a *détente* with Ankara. Since the 1970s, Greek statesmen have consistently opted for rapprochement when Greece and Turkey were on the brink of armed confrontation several times over oil exploration rights in the Aegean. Today, with Turkey having much more economic and military power than in the past, Greece should be even more willing to put an end to its policy of brinkmanship and seek a reconciliation when it comes to natural gas exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the refugee and the Libyan crises. Most importantly, Greece should push the EU to end its buck-passing strategy in the face of the threat posed by the Syrian regime and Russia. Continuing to remain on the sidelines would sow further divisions within the EU, would fuel populism and xenophobia across the continent, and would imperil Greek and European security interests in the Mediterranean.

INTRODUCTION

Greece's long-term project of constructing an underwater gas pipeline to transport the newly discovered Eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe via Greece (hence bypassing Turkey) was dealt a blow in November 2019 when Turkey signed a maritime delineation and defense cooperation agreement with the UN-recognized GNA government. The agreed-upon exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and continental shelf (CS) delineations cut off the prospective route of the East-Med gas pipeline and thus effectively dash any hopes for its construction. Notwithstanding Athens's strong objections that the agreed-upon delineations infringe upon the Greek and Greek Cypriot CS/EEZs (see figure below), Turkish President Erdoğan stated clearly since the very beginning that "South Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel cannot establish any natural gas pipeline in this region without Turkey's consent."¹

1. "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Libya'yla Anlaşmada Türkiye Uluslararası Haklarını Kullandı", *Anadolu Ajansı*, December 9, 2019. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/libya/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-libyayla-anlasmada-turkiye-uluslararasi-haklarini-kullandi/1668679> (Access date: March 6, 2020).

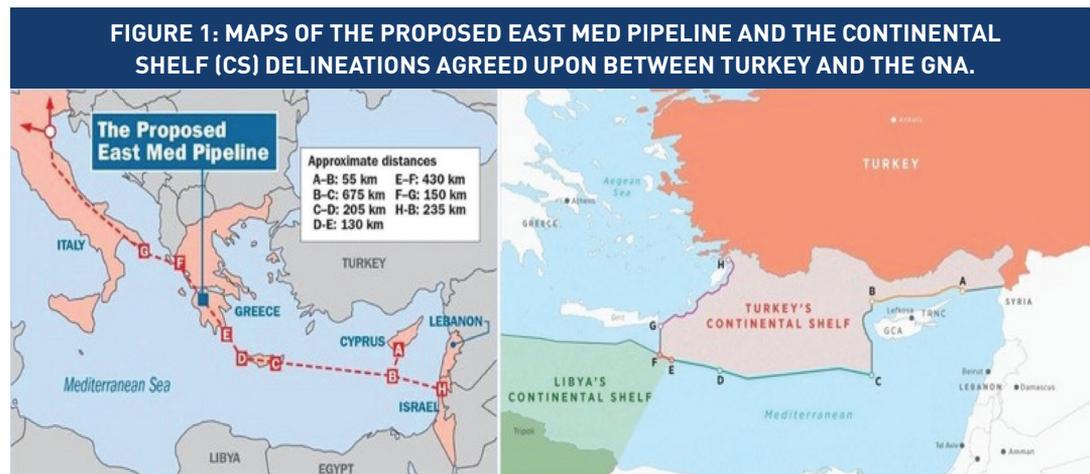
Ankara then pressed ahead with the defense cooperation agreement and on January 2, 2020, Turkey's Grand National Assembly (TBMM) approved the bill authorizing the government to deploy troops in Libya in support of the GNA.² Greek diplomatic maneuvers to exclude Turkey from the Eastern Mediterranean gas bonanza suffered another big setback when Italy decided to withdraw its support from the EastMed project and when Athens was left out of the Berlin Summit on Libya on January 19, 2020.³ Greece responded by inviting the putschist general Khalifa Haftar to visit Athens two days before the Berlin Summit, but this was merely a face-saving act. It is clear that, unlike Turkey, Greece is in no position to influence and dictate the developments in Libya and in the Eastern Mediterranean region in general. The main reason for this is Greece's comparatively low deterrent ability; Athens does not have sufficient military power to bolster its hand diplomatically. Ankara, by contrast, was able to steer the diplomatic process on Libya (together with Germany and Russia) only because it backed its maritime accord with the GNA by deploying troops to Libya.⁴

Greece's low deterrent ability became once more evident during the current and ongoing mass influx of refugees to the Greek-Turkish border. In the wake of a deadly airstrike by Syrian regime forces that killed 33 Turkish soldiers on February 27, 2020, Ankara launched Operation Spring Shield to push regime forces back to

2. Veysel Kurt, "Tezkere Sonrası Libya'da Denklem", *Sabah*, January 4, 2020. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/perspektif/yazarlar/veyselkurt/2020/01/04/tezkere-sonrasi-libyada-denklemler> (Access date: March 7, 2020).

3. Barış Seçkin, "Libya Cease-Fire Needed for Dialogue: Italy's Di Maio", *Anadolu Ajansı*, January 18, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/libya-cease-fire-needed-for-dialogue-italys-di-maio/1706492> (Access date: March 7, 2020).

4. Hilal Kaplan, "Diplomacy of Hypocrisy in Berlin Conference", *Daily Sabah*, January 24, 2020. https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/hilal_kaplan/2020/01/24/diplomacy-of-hypocrisy-in-berlin-conference (Access date: March 9, 2020).



Source: "Israeli Officials Ready to Discuss Mediterranean Pipeline with Turkey: Report", *Daily Sabah*, December 16, 2019. <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/12/16/israeli-officials-ready-to-discuss-mediterranean-pipeline-with-turkey-report> (Access date: March 7, 2020).

the 2018 Sochi demarcation line agreed upon with Russia and concurrently announced that it would open its borders for migrants and refugees to cross into Europe.⁵ To be sure, this was the ninth time in fact that President Erdoğan had threatened to open his country's borders unless EU countries undertook concrete steps to help Turkey in dealing with the Idlib crisis and with more than 3 million Syrian refugees already in Turkey.⁶ On its part, Greece vetoed NATO's statement of support for Turkey in Idlib, invoked Article 78.3 of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the EU* (TFEU) seeking full European support in dealing with the refugee influx, and is meting out a harsh response to the thousands of refugees amassed at the Greek-Turkish border.⁷ Athens has already deployed elite troops to reinforce

its land and sea borders with Turkey; however, Ankara promptly responded by also deploying 1,000 police special forces to prevent refugee pushbacks. In the wake of the most recent Idlib ceasefire agreed upon in Moscow (March 5, 2020), Turkey announced that it is determined to continue its open-door policy for the refugees who want to cross to Europe.⁸

THE FAILURE OF THE GREEK AND EUROPEAN BUCK-PASSING STRATEGY

It is essential to recognize the fact that Greece is facing a major refugee crisis today because of the wrong strategy employed by the EU throughout the Syrian civil war. Since the very beginning, EU countries fully recognized the need to prevent the aggression of the Assad regime and to check Russian assertiveness in the Middle East/Mediterranean, but they looked for some other

5. Burhanettin Duran, "Erdoğan-Putin Meeting and EU's Migration Strategy", *Daily Sabah*, March 4, 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/erdogan-putin-meeting-and-eus-migration-strategy> (Access date: March 9, 2020).

6. Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Patrick Kingsley, "Turkey, Pressing EU for Help in Syria, Threatens to Open Borders to Refugees", *The New York Times*, February 28, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/28/world/europe/turkey-refugees-Greece-erdogan.html> (Access date: March 9, 2020).

7. Mehmet Hatipoğlu, "Greek Intervention in NATO session 'Led to Chaos'", *Anadolu Ajansı*, March 1, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/greek-intervention-in-nato-session-led-to-chaos/1751009> (Access date: March 9, 2020).

8. Jennifer Rankin, Helena Smith, Kate Connolly, Bethan McKernan, "Refugees Told 'Europe Is Closed' as Tensions Rise at Greece-Turkey Border", *The Guardian*, March 6, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/06/refugees-europe-closed-tensions-greece-turkey-border> (Access date: March 9, 2020).

FIGURE 2: MIGRANTS AMASSED AT THE GREEK-TURKISH BORDER ON MARCH 1, 2020.

Source: Matina Stevis-Gridneff, "Greece Suspends Asylum as Turkey Opens Gates for Migrants", *The New York Times*, March 1, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/world/europe/greece-migrants-border-turkey.html> (Access date: March 17, 2020).

state that was equally or more threatened by the aggressor to perform the onerous task. In other words, instead of assuming direct responsibility for checking the regime and Russian aggression by forming a balancing coalition with Turkey, the EU opted instead to pass the buck to Ankara while it remained on the sidelines.⁹ That Turkey was the intended buck-catcher since the very beginning is clearly shown by the fact that the EU did not stand by the provisions of the refugee readmission agreement it signed with Ankara on March 18, 2016. More specifically, the EU did not fulfill its pledge of resettling in Europe a number of Syrian refugees equal to the number of those who were returned to Turkey from the Greek islands; by 2018, it had paid only half

9. The strategies of "balancing" and "buck-passing" as discussed in this section are from John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), pp. 156-162.

of the agreed 6 billion euro aid package; and no concrete steps were undertaken to address the issues of visa exemptions, the customs union agreement, and the opening of new chapters in Turkey's EU accession process.¹⁰

Hence, the EU and Greece (as the bloc's southern border) calculated that this free-riding strategy would provide defense on the cheap while, most importantly, Turkey would pay the substantial cost of checking the Assad regime and Russia if the deterrence in northern Syria failed. The deterrence did indeed fail after the Syrian regime several times broke the September 2018 Idlib ceasefire agreed upon by Russia and Turkey in Sochi. Yet, the tense situation came to a head on February 27, 2020, when Syr-

10. Hilal Kaplan, "Turkey Is Not Europe's Gatekeeper", *Daily Sabah*, March 6, 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/turkey-is-not-europes-gatekeeper> (Access date: March 17, 2020).

ian regime forces killed 33 Turkish soldiers in a deadly airstrike. Despite initially paying a staggering price in terms of the death toll, Ankara quickly proved to Europe that buck-passing was not a foolproof strategy. By undertaking a successful armed drones campaign against Syrian regime targets (Operation Spring Shield), and by opening its borders for refugees who wanted to cross into Europe, Turkey left Greece and the EU in a precarious strategic position, with thousands amassed at the bloc's southern frontier. In the words of Mark Leonard, director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, "It shows that Europe's complete holiday from geopolitics always ends up being very costly. Europe again is in full spectator mode, incredibly passive through the whole Idlib crisis, which was predictable and predicted."¹¹

Notwithstanding the seriousness of Turkey's recent moves, Greece and the EU have not yet undertaken any concrete steps to address Ankara's demands. To the contrary, EU media and several EU ambassadors are voicing outrage over what they see as Turkey's weaponizing of refugees to blackmail Europe. Similarly, Greek Premier Kyriakos Mitsotakis accusingly stated, "Turkey has become an official trafficker of migrants to the European Union, and Greece does not accept this situation ... The problem is an asymmetric threat and illegal invasion of thousands of people that threatens our territory."¹² Moreover, both the presidents of the European Council and Commission in a recent visit to the Greek-Turkish border displayed solidarity with the harsh

Greek response to the refugee wave by praising Greece for being Europe's "shield,"¹³ while the European Border Protection Agency (Frontex) has deployed troops from 22 EU member states to help Greece in protecting the bloc's southern border.¹⁴ Yet, Turkey is determined this time to keep its gates open until the EU undertakes concrete steps to help it in dealing with the Idlib crisis and with more than 3 million Syrian refugees already in Turkey. Brussels is now confronted with two stark choices: the refugees will have to go either to Europe or return to Syria. There is no third alternative. It is actually in the interest of both Turkey and the EU to resettle these refugees in the safe zones established in northern Syria. Unless it does so, the specter of refugee influxes will continue to haunt the EU, and will strengthen Russia's hand in supporting anti-establishment forces in the Old Continent.¹⁵

President Erdoğan's most recent meeting with EU leaders in Brussels on March 9, 2020, brought nothing new to the table. The EU is still refusing to do what it had promised, both about the current Idlib crisis and the March 2016 refugee readmission agreement. It seems reasonable to argue that the inner European divisions constitute the main problem that is preventing the EU from building a more realist foreign policy toward Turkey and the Idlib crisis.¹⁶ German Chancellor Angela Merkel, by calling for the establishment

11. Steven Erlanger, "A Balancing Act for Europe: Stop the Migrants, Support Greece, Assuage Turkey", *The New York Times*, March 4, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/04/world/europe/europe-migrants-turkey-greece.html> (Access date: March 17, 2020).

12. Matina Stevis-Gridneff, "Vigilantes in Greece Say 'No More' to Migrants", *The New York Times*, March 7, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/world/europe/greece-turkey-migrants.html> (Access date: March 17, 2020).

13. Hans von der Burchard and David M. Herszenhorn, "Von der Leyen Wants 'Workable Agreement' with Erdogan on Migration", *Politico*, March 9, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-turkey-greece-migration-ursula-von-der-leyen-wants-workable-agreement-with-erdogan/> (Access date: March 18, 2020).

14. "Europe's Frontex Sends More Guards to Protect Greek Border", *The New York Times*, March 13, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/03/13/world/europe/ap-eu-greece-migrants-frontex.html> (Access date: March 18, 2020).

15. Hasan Basri Yalçın, "İdlib Brüksel Hattı", *Sabah*, March 9, 2020. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/hasan-basri-yalcin/2020/03/09/idlib-bruksel-hatti> (Access date: March 17, 2020).

16. Idem, "Avrupa'nın Halleri", *Sabah*, March 10, 2020. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/hasan-basri-yalcin/2020/03/10/avrupanin-halleri> (Access date: March 18, 2020).

of a safe zone in northern Syria, is actually the only 'big' EU leader that has come to terms with the fact that buck-passing is not a viable strategy in dealing with Turkey. Turkey can simply not shoulder all the burden of keeping Syrian regime aggression and Russian assertiveness at bay. What a realist EU foreign policy should entail instead is putting together a balancing coalition with Turkey to deter Syria and Russia. The 'big' obstacle, however, in building such a realist policy is French president Emmanuel Macron, who has joined forces with the bloc's traditional anti-Turkish axis - Greece and Cyprus. These three actors seem not only committed to a strategy of buck-passing, but are also keen on strengthening Russia's hand in European domestic affairs. After all, as Dimitar Bechev aptly points out, Greece and Cyprus have always been the core of the "pro-Russian camp within the EU."¹⁷

What France, Greece, and Cyprus still refuse to accept is that the strategy of buck-passing has already failed and it carries the risk of wrecking the European project. Even voices otherwise critical of Turkey now acknowledge this reality. For instance, Kati Piri, a Dutch Member of the European Parliament and former rapporteur on Turkey's EU membership, recently noted,

Laying the blame on the Turkish president is simply too easy. If the EU-Turkey deal is in tatters, it's also because the EU was - at the very least - negligent in delivering on its side of the bargain ... As we are not willing to welcome millions of refugees in Europe, we have no other option but to strike a new agreement with Turkey. This time, we must make sure we steer clear of stop-gap solutions and make realistic commitments on which we can deliver.¹⁸

17. Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia's Influence in Southeast Europe*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 138.

18. Kati Piri, "Blame Europe Not Just Turkey for Migration Deal Collapse", *Politico*, March 5, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/blame-europe-not-just-turkey-for-migration-deal-collapse/> (Access date: March 18, 2020).

THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND LIBYA VORTEX

Libya is the scene of another destabilizing conflict in Europe's neighborhood where Greece has taken again a staunchly anti-Turkish line by sponsoring the putschist general Khalifa Haftar in his anti-GNA offensive. Being excluded from the Berlin Summit on Libya on January 19, 2020, Athens has consistently threatened its EU partners that it would block any political solution to the Libyan crisis unless the November 2019 Turkey-GNA maritime deal is nullified.¹⁹ In its Libya policy, Greece has found again the support of one of EU's big three, France. French president Macron received Khalifa Haftar, whom he provides with weapons and intelligence, in Paris on March 10, 2020 (two months earlier, Greece likewise hosted Haftar in Athens), concerned that his country's energy interests in Libya would be imperiled if the GNA ends up having the upper hand.

France also sent its only aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle*, Europe's largest, on a mission in the Eastern Mediterranean where it is escorted by the Hellenic navy. The carrier docked on February 21, 2020, in the port of Limassol in Cyprus,²⁰ a move Athens sees as indicative of French support for Greece and the Cypriot administration in light of the Turkey-GNA deal that allegedly infringes upon both countries' territorial waters. *Charles de Gaulle's* mission in the Eastern Mediterranean coincided also with reports coming from the

19. Ildir Lika, "Greek Security Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean", *SETA Analysis*, No. 60, (February 2020), p. 15.

20. Annette Chrysostomou, "French Carrier Charles de Gaulle Docks in Limassol (with Photos)", *Cyprus Mail*, February 21, 2020. <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/02/21/french-carrier-charles-de-gaulle-docks-in-limassol-with-photos/> (Access date: March 19, 2020).

FIGURE 3: GREEK PRIME MINISTER KYRIAKOS MITSOTAKIS MEETING WITH KHALIFA HAFTAR ON JANUARY 17, 2020, IN ATHENS.



Source: "Haftar, Yunanistan Başbakanı Miçotakis ve Dış İşleri Bakanı Dendias ile görüştü", *Anadolu Ajansı*, January 17, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/hafter-yunanistan-basbakani-micotakis-ve-disisleri-bakani-dendias-ile-gorustu/1706055> (Access date: March 19, 2020).

Turkish media that Ankara will be soon sending its drilling ship *Oruç Reis* to start looking for hydrocarbon reserves off the southeast of the Greek island of Crete.²¹

Greece (and Cyprus) has already demanded tough responses from the EU to what it sees as unauthorized Turkish drilling for gas and oil in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, with the EU presently in a state of strategic atrophy and very much divided over how to deal with Turkey, Greece's time-tested strategy of external balancing is also facing its limits. On the other hand, by continuing to sponsor Haftar, the French-Greek bloc in the EU is simply provoking further civil war in Libya and thus might precipitate future refugee waves from the war-torn North African country to Europe. The EU's recent decision to launch a new operation with naval ships,

planes, and satellites to enforce the UN arms embargo on Libya²² seems to be hypocritical at best. While Egypt, France, and the United Arab Emirates continue to support militarily Haftar, the main aim of the recent EU decision is to try to block Turkey's support for the legitimate, UN-recognized GNA.²³ The current Libya policy represents once more for the EU, and especially for Greece and France, an awkward moral clash with its professed values of protecting democracy and human rights. What Greece and France are in fact sponsoring in Libya is not only an illegitimate, putschist general, but also someone who recently established close ties with Damascus, the regime responsible for the mass murder of

21. "Girit'in Ruhsatı Hazır", *Yeni Şafak*, February 19, 2020. <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/giritin-ruhsati-hazir-3526181> (Access date: March 19, 2020).

22. Steven Erlanger, "With Libya Still at War, EU Agrees to Try Blocking Weapons Flow", *The New York Times*, February 17, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/world/europe/libya-eu-arms-blockade.html> (Access date: March 19, 2020).

23. Hilal Kaplan, "Turkey's Struggle in Syria and Libya", *Daily Sabah*, March 13, 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/turkeys-struggle-in-syria-and-libya> (Access date: March 18, 2020).

half a million of its citizens.²⁴ Not coincidentally the rhetoric employed by Bashar al Assad and Khalifa Haftar is disturbingly the same - both claim that their armies are fighting Turkish-backed terrorists. Continuing to support Haftar then is clear proof of the EU's moral hypocrisy. Last but not least, what Greece and France still refuse to accept, similar to the Idlib crisis, is that Ankara's efforts in Libya actually contribute to European security²⁵ by keeping potential refugee influxes at bay and by supporting majority rule in an Arab country.

PROSPECTS FOR A RENEWED GREEK-TURKISH DÉTENTE

The current security challenges Greece is facing in the Eastern Mediterranean and on its land and sea border with Turkey evidence its comparatively low deterrent ability. Unlike Turkey that clearly demonstrated its deterrent power in the Idlib crisis by launching Operation Spring Shield,²⁶ Greece does not have sufficient military capability to live up to its sometimes aggressive rhetoric. This is a recurring structural problem for which Greek defense doctrine has struggled to devise a remedy. Internal balancing, through mobilizing additional military resources of its own, has never been a feasible long-term solution for Greece due to its small population and comparatively meagre economic resources. The only other option Athens could rely on to create a more favorable balance of power with

Turkey has been external balancing²⁷ through diplomatic maneuverings and using its leverage within Western institutions. Indeed, even NATO membership, Greece's perhaps most important foreign policy decision, was viewed since the very beginning not only as a way to head off the Soviet threat but also "as a means of counteracting Turkey."²⁸ Later on, Greece's membership in the then European Community (EC) in 1981 became the only forum where it enjoyed a comparative advantage over Ankara, and Greece has used it quite effectively to push back against Turkey. Today, however, as discussed above in relation to the Idlib/refugee and Libyan crises, Greece's time-tested strategy of external balancing is also facing its limits, because the EU itself is in a state of strategic atrophy and very much divided over how to deal with Turkey. It is in this regard that I argue that long-term strategic competition with Turkey is not an option for Greece. Instead, Athens's (and European) security interests would actually be best served by a renewed détente with Ankara.

Since the 1970s, strained bilateral relations, as is the current state of affairs, have been the norm rather than the exception for Greece and Turkey. Indeed, the two neighbors have come dangerously close to war three times (August 1976, March 1987, and January 1996) over oil exploration rights in the Aegean, but each time Greece subsequently opted for rapprochement acknowledging Turkey's quantitative and qualitative military superiority. First, two years after the August 1976 crisis when the then Greek opposition leader Andreas Papandreu (center

24. "Haftar's Team Pays Visit to Syrian Regime Officials", *Anadolu Ajansı*, March 1, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/haftars-team-pays-visit-to-syrian-regime-officials/1750887> (Access date: March 19, 2020).

25. Muhittin Ataman, "Europe's Reaction to the New Refugee Influx", *Daily Sabah*, March 11, 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/europes-reaction-to-the-new-refugee-influx> (Access date: March 19, 2020).

26. Idem, "Idlib Crisis: Turkey's Deterrent Power, Europe's Reluctance", *Daily Sabah*, March 4, 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/idlib-crisis-turkeys-deterrent-power-europes-reluctance> (Access date: March 19, 2020).

27. The terms "external" and "internal" balancing were introduced in International Relations (IR) theory by Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 118-163.

28. Thanos P. Dokos and Panayotis J. Tsakonas, "Greek-Turkish Relations in the Post-Cold War Era", in Christos Kollias and Gülay Günlük-Şenesen (eds.), *Greece and Turkey in the 21st Century: Conflict or Cooperation* (New York: NOVA Science Publishers, 2003), p. 17.

FIGURE 4: THE HISTORIC HANDSHAKE BETWEEN PRIME MINISTERS ANDREAS PAPANDEUROU AND TURGUT ÖZAL DURING THE WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM MEETING IN DAVOS, SWITZERLAND (JANUARY 31, 1988).



Source: https://tr.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dosya:Davos_Declaration_-_World_Economic_Forum_Annual_Meeting_1988_-_Papandreu_-_Ozal.jpg (Access date: March 19, 2020).

left) called for the sinking of the Turkish drilling ship *Sismik*, Greek premier Konstantinos Karamanlis (center right) during a summit in Montreux, Switzerland (March 1978) offered to the then Turkish prime minister Bülent Ecevit to sign a treaty of non-aggression, but Ecevit declined the offer.²⁹ Second, the March 1987 crisis involving again the Turkish drilling ship *Sismik* was diffused during the widely acclaimed Davos meeting (January 1988) between the then Greek premier Andreas Papandreu and his Turkish counterpart Turgut Özal. Among other factors, one of the main motivations for rapprochement

on the Greek side was its perception of military inferiority vis-à-vis Turkey. Indeed, during the March 1987 crisis, the Greek high command issued a report arguing that “if it had escalated, the military could have checked the Turkish army for only three days, and hence Greece would have lost the war.”³⁰

Finally, the January 1996 crisis over the Kardak/Imia islets in the Aegean paved the way to the eventual Greek-Turkish thaw of 1999, where it was again the Greek government that first showed moderation. This time, then Greek foreign minister George Papandreu (Andreas’s

29. Richard Clogg, “Greek-Turkish Relations in the Post-1974 Period”, in Dimitri Conostas (ed.), *The Greek-Turkish Conflict in the 1990s: Domestic and External Influences* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), pp. 16-17.

30. Geoffrey Pridham, “Linkage Politics Theory and the Greek-Turkish Rapprochement”, in Conostas (ed.), *The Greek-Turkish Conflict in the 1990s*, p. 80.

son) and his Turkish counterpart Ismail Cem were the main architects of the *détente*.³¹

Today, with Turkey having much more economic and military power than in the past, Greece should be even more willing to put an end to its policy of brinkmanship and seek a new reconciliation with Turkey concerning natural gas exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the refugee and the Libyan crises. The strategy of buck-passing in Syria and sponsoring a putschist general in Libya benefits neither Greece nor the EU. As Ian Lesser, the vice president of the German Marshall Fund, recently noted, “A Greek-Turkish *détente* has been one of the cornerstones of geostrategic relations in the southeastern Mediterranean - and the potential of this collapsing is alarming to the region and Western allies.”³² Yet, what the historical precedents teach us is that Greece and Turkey have always managed to find a way out whenever bilateral relations became seriously strained. The current crisis likewise may push the two governments to embark again on a dialogue and an eventual *détente*.

CONCLUSION

The analysis has provided an overview of the two main security challenges Greece faces today and discussed the prospects for a renewed Greek-Turkish *détente*. First, it made the point that Greece (and the EU) is facing a major refugee crisis today because of the wrong strategy employed throughout the Syrian civil war and especially during the most recent escalation in Idlib. The strategy of buck-passing, getting Tur-

key to bear the entire burden of checking the regime and Russian aggression in Syria, eventually failed, and has left both Greece and the EU in a precarious strategic position. They can no longer afford to remain on the sidelines because doing so would sow further divisions within the EU, fuel populism and xenophobia across the continent, and imperil Greek and European security interests in the Mediterranean. Even though the EU's top diplomat Josep Borrell still sticks to the position that in northern Syria “the EU cannot create a safe zone, we are not so powerful,”³³ Athens and Brussels have to come up with some other realistic commitments on which they can deliver. This time Turkey is determined not to close its borders until Europe undertakes concrete steps to share the burden.

The most likely scenario is that Greek leaders will once more opt for a renewed *détente* with Turkey. This will benefit both Greece and its Western allies since a Greek-Turkish *détente* is the cornerstone of geopolitical stability in the Mediterranean.

Second, the analysis argued that by supporting the putschist general Khalifa Haftar in Libya, Greece is likewise following a policy that is actually detrimental to both its own and European security interests. Indeed, going against the legitimate, UN-recognized GNA government not only provokes further civil war in Libya but might also precipitate future refugee waves from the war-torn North African country to Europe.

Finally, the analysis discussed the prospects for a renewed Greek-Turkish *détente*. Drawing

31. Alexis Heraclides, *The Greek-Turkish Conflict in the Aegean: Imagined Enemies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 134-141.

32. Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Patrick Kingsley, “Turkey Steps Back from Confrontation at Greek Border”, *The New York Times*, March 13, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/world/europe/turkey-greece-border-migrants.html> (Access date: March 19, 2020).

33. Jacopo Barigazzi, “EU Top Diplomat Urges Better Russia, Turkey Ties After Syria Deal”, *Politico*, March 5, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-top-diplomat-urges-better-russia-turkey-ties-after-syria-deal/> (Access date: March 20, 2020).

on historical precedents when bilateral relations were seriously strained, I argued that the current crisis has also the potential to lead to a new rapprochement between the two neighbors. The main reason for this is that Greece can simply not afford a long-term strategic competition with Turkey while both its “internal” and

“external” balancing strategies are off limits. The most likely scenario is that Greek leaders will once more opt for a renewed détente with Turkey. This will benefit both Greece and its Western allies since a Greek-Turkish détente is the cornerstone of geopolitical stability in the Mediterranean.

GREECE'S EMERGING SECURITY CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE OF GREEK-TURKISH RELATIONS

IDLIR LIKA

SETA | ANALYSIS

The analysis provides an overview of the two central security challenges Greece faces today, namely the energy rivalry with Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean/Libya, and the mass influx of refugees at the Greek-Turkish border, and discusses the prospects for a renewed Greek-Turkish *détente*.

The November 2019 Turkey-Libya maritime accord and the most recent mass influx of refugees at the Greek-Turkish border constitute the two central challenges to Greece's security today. Turkey's deal with the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli imperils Greek economic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and dashes the hopes for the construction of the East Mediterranean gas pipeline, whereas the refugee influx has significantly strained Greek-Turkish relations and has tarnished Greek (and European) normative standing over its harsh treatment of the refugees. Greece has already deployed major military forces to secure its eastern land border with Turkey and concurrently sponsors the rebel leader Khalifa Haftar in his anti-GNA offensive in Libya, but Athens's deterrent ability on its own is quite low.

The comparatively low deterrent ability is a recurring problem for which Greek defense doctrine has struggled to devise a remedy. Realizing the limits of internal balancing, for decades Greece has had to rely on Western support to offset the quantitative and qualitative superiority of Turkish military forces. However, with the EU presently in a state of strategic atrophy and very much divided over how to deal with Turkey, Greece's time-tested strategy of external balancing is also facing its limits. Under such circumstances and given the comparatively meagre economic resources, long-term strategic competition with Turkey is not an option for Greece. Instead, Athens's security interests would actually be best served by a *détente* with Ankara. Since the 1970s, Greek statesmen have consistently opted for rapprochement when Greece and Turkey were on the brink of armed confrontation several times over oil exploration rights in the Aegean. Today, with Turkey having much more economic and military power than in the past, Greece should be even more willing to put an end to its policy of brinkmanship and seek a reconciliation when it comes to natural gas exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the refugee and the Libyan crises. Most importantly, Greece should push the EU to end its buck-passing strategy in the face of the threat posed by the Syrian regime and Russia. Continuing to remain on the sidelines would sow further divisions within the EU, would fuel populism and xenophobia across the continent, and would imperil Greek and European security interests in the Mediterranean.

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