

A thaw in Turkish-Greek relations

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Turkish-Greek relations have remained difficult for decades and are characterised by recurring periods of heightened tensions. In addition to long-standing socially and politically charged resentments, the main source of contention between the two states centres around security issues. This includes military rivalry fuelled largely by the disagreement over the delimitation of maritime borders in the Aegean and Mediterranean, oftentimes resulting in military incidents between the two sides. The Turkish-Greek dispute is also exacerbated by the unresolved conflict in Cyprus. Due to the two countries' membership of NATO and the special role of the US in their foreign policies, tensions also impinge on the cohesion of the alliance. Combined with Greece's membership of the European Union – which in turn drags EU states into the Turkish-Greek dispute – this also impacts Turkey's relations with the EU.

The first half of 2023 saw an easing of tensions, including Greece sending humanitarian aid to Turkey after the earthquake, followed by foreign ministerial meetings and, more broadly, Ankara's efforts resume active dialogue with Western countries. A watershed moment came with the direct talks on 20 September between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis on the margins of the UN General Assembly session. The leaders pledged to strengthen cooperation – particularly on migration issues – planning, further down the line, foreign ministerial meetings with a commitment to search for joint confidence-building measures. Despite the lack of statements with regards to resolving systemic conflicts between the states (i.e. the maritime border problem, the Cyprus issue), the improvement in Ankara's relations with Athens is still likely to have a positive impact on the climate of Turkey's relations with the EU and the US.

Difficult neighbourhood

Turkish-Greek relations remain complicated, due to both historical burdens and regional disputes, as well as the mutual distrust between the two sides. Historically, the memory of nearly 200 years of conflict and ethnic cleansing in areas inhabited simultaneously by Turks and Greeks constitutes a sensitive issue, followed by the war between both states in 1919–22 (which is the founding myth of the Republic of Turkey) and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974.

The most serious of the current disputes concerns the delimitation of maritime boundaries. Turkey, unlike Greece, has not signed the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which establishes, among other matters, the boundaries of the continental shelf, territorial sea and maritime economic zones. Not being bound by it – and referring to older international regulations – Turkey considers most of the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea as lying on the Turkish continental shelf, which, according to Ankara's interpretation, deprives

Athens of the rights to the territorial sea or economic zones around these islands. For this reason, armed incidents often occur between the two states. The dispute is also compounded by the demilitarised status of the Greek islands of the northern Aegean Sea and the Dodecanese islands, which is included in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and the 1947 Treaty of Paris. Ankara blames Athens for violating these military restrictions – for example, it disputes the legality of sending armoured Greek vehicles to the islands of Lesbos and Samos in September 2022. The rivalry between the two states to secure both strategic and military superiority in the Aegean and Mediterranean region also remains an area of mutual tension.

In addition to the aforementioned problems, the most difficult political and strategic area of contention remains the conflict over the status of Cyprus, which has not been settled since the 1960s. In 2021, Ankara abandoned the UN and EU-supported (including Greece) formula of federalising the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and the Republic of Cyprus (which is an EU member state) into a single state, instead opting out to call on the international community to recognise the distinctiveness of the TRNC as an independent and fully-fledged political entity. Currently, only Turkey recognises the statehood of the TRNC.

Another difficult issue in Turkish-Greek relations is the migration problem (both countries lie on the route from the Middle East to Europe). Athens has accused Ankara of illegally sending refugees from Turkish territory into Greek territorial waters, while Turkey has accused Greece of not accepting them as agreed in the so-called migration agreement concluded between the EU and Turkey in 2016. Additionally, Ankara blames Athens for tolerating the activity of Kurdish terrorist groups in refugee camps on Greek territory.

Conversely, strong tensions between the two countries are also intertwined with periods of cooperation, such as joint NATO exercises or mutual assistance in fighting forest fires. Conflicts between both states tend to flare up and subside in cycles primarily in circumstances related to the domestic situation in both countries or the need for social mobilisation (e.g. during political crises or election campaigns).

Greece and Turkey's problems with the US and the EU

Turkish-Greek problems significantly impinge on Turkey's relations with the US and the EU. Greece is skilfully playing up Washington's growing distrust of Ankara by positioning itself as an alternative partner for military cooperation in the region and as a host for US military infrastructure. A US naval base has already been located in Crete since 1969. In addition, Athens and Washington ratified a defence cooperation agreement in 2022, giving the US access to the infrastructure of the base in Volos, the training ground at Litochoro and the port of Alexandroupolis (the US intends to use it as a naval base). Prime Minister Mitsotakis's lobbying in Washington (May 2022) to block Turkey's purchase of US F-16 fighter jets is also an important element of the Turkish-Greek dispute. It resulted in the Congress making the receipt of written assurances from the White House that Turkey would not use them to violate Greek airspace one of the conditions of the sale of these jets to Ankara.

The Turkish-Greek conflict is also influenced by the EU, of which Greece and the Republic of Cyprus are members. In its disputes with Ankara, Athens can count on EU solidarity – particularly on issues that are important and sensitive for Greece which also easily find

positive resonance in the EU institutions. This is demonstrated, for example, by entries critical of Turkey in European Commission reports and European Parliament resolutions, by addressing interventionist calls to Ankara to de-escalate military action and by using Athens' position in the EU to block attempts to restart Turkey's accession talks.

The role both countries play in the migration route from the Middle East to Europe remains an important context. At the height of the 2015–6 migration crisis, Turkey signed a cooperation agreement with the EU enabling the flow of refugees to be contained. However, migratory pressures persist (Turkey hosts four million refugees) with Turkey and Greece blaming each other for failing to fulfil the obligations of an otherwise expired agreement, with the bulk of the issues being concentrated on the maritime border between Turkey and Greece.

Prospects for improving relations

The declarations of the willingness to improve relations that the Turkish President made during his talks with the Greek Prime Minister on 20 September can be seen as an indication of a thaw in bilateral relations. Assurances of cooperation on solving the migration problem seem particularly promising. Both sides need an extension of the EU migration agreement, which expired in 2021, and the establishment of a new mechanism for the exchange and return of refugees. The prospects of forging a compromise – potentially with EU mediation and a financial incentive for Ankara – seems most promising on this particular issue. In the area of energy cooperation, there is an opportunity to return to talks on the transport of natural gas. Greece – along with Bulgaria – is one of the key transit countries for gas flowing from Turkey to Europe. In the context of the EU's increased need for alternative sources to Russian gas, and in view of Turkey's growing role as a gas hub, improving relations between Ankara and Athens may create new opportunities for the development of gas transport infrastructure to sell additional volumes to the EU – flowing mainly from Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iran, and in the future probably also from Israel and Egypt. Similarly, it cannot be ruled out that improved relations between Turkey and Greece will have a positive impact on Ankara's rapprochement with Washington, which would increase the likelihood of the sale of F-16 fighter jets – important for obtaining Turkey's decision to ratify Sweden's NATO membership. However, it should not be expected that the process of rapprochement between Ankara and Athens will settle structural and petrified conflicts over maritime borders or the Cyprus issue – both of which have existed for decades.