

GREECE, TURKEY, AEGEAN

SITUATION REPORT

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SUMMARY: Turkey's neo-Ottoman posture and president Erdogan's pugnacious stance continue to feed the Greek-Turkish crisis. Erdogan's recent visit to Greece confirmed the Turkish president's aggressive tactics and demands for renegotiating the Lausanne Treaty. Turkey's provocations in the Aegean continue unabated and Ankara exploits illegal alien flows from its shores to Greece as a weapon to bully and blackmail Athens. Turkish senior government officials make inflammatory statements about the use of force to reclaim purported "Turkish" islands and islets in the Aegean and Turkey pursues the tactic of "hot incidents" to promote its claims upon Greece. With the European Union unable to provide any true relief or opposition to Turkey's expansionist tendencies, *Greece's only realistic hope for ensuring a peaceful balance in the Aegean is security cooperation with the United States.*

1. BACKGROUND

Greek-Turkish relations entered a new era of confrontation after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in July 1974. The occupation of approximately forty percent of the island's territory, and the Turkish Cypriot UDI of November 5, 1983, inaugurated a period of instability in Greek-Turkish relations that has not abated since.

The Imia crisis of January 1996, when Turkey launched a military territorial claim upon two uninhabited rocky islets near the Greek island of Kalymnos, opened a new phase in Greek-Turkish relations, with Ankara rapidly expanding its claims in the Greek Aegean and threatening Greece with war.

Turkish saber rattling continues to this day with frequent violations of Greek sovereign air space by the Turkish air force and frequent similar actions by Turkish warships. The coup d'état of July 2016, [suspected](#) of being an Erdogan false flag operation, has further escalated the war of words

emanating from Ankara over an imbroglio involving [alleged Turkish putschists](#) receiving sanctuary in Greece. A [tense state visit](#) to Greece by president Erdogan in December 2017 confirmed the steadily deteriorating state of Greek-Turkish relations. Turkey is also anxious at what it perceives as a “Greek grab” of rich hydrocarbon deposits in the Aegean and the sea around Cyprus.

2. THREATS OF CONFLICT

Ever since 1974, Turkey has adopted a no-war-no-peace approach in its bilateral relations with Greece. Turkish posturing includes threats of use of force if Greece extends its territorial waters to 12 miles in the Aegean, badgering over the so-called “grey zones” in the Archipelago (i.e. waters Turkey claims are of undetermined international status), and belligerent language over Greece’s alleged mistreatment of what Ankara considers a “Turkish minority” living in Greek Western Thrace.

Following the Erdogan visit to Athens, Turkish officials have steeply escalated the war of words against Greece. Turkish opposition leaders, eager to appear more fervent than Erdogan, have not hesitated to call for the use of force to claim Aegean islets and islands of “undetermined status” which “belong” to Turkey.

Erdogan himself announced during his visit to Greece the “need” for the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which settled Turkey’s borders after World War I, to be renegotiated because it [“was not being applied fairly.”](#) Greek government vacillation over the Turkish alleged coup plotters seeking asylum has further poured oil on the fire allowing Erdogan to claim Greek PM Tsipras “personally promised” him to extradite the alleged conspirators to Turkey.

Hydrocarbons exploration is also growing as [cause](#) of tension and conflict between Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Italy, Israel, and Egypt, on the one hand, and Turkey on the other. Turkey’s dispute of Greece’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Aegean adds to these tensions.

3. NATO, EU, USA, TURKEY

Post-1974 Greek-Turkish crises unfolded against the backdrop of the NATO alliance, to which both Greece and Turkey belong, and American strategic and security interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition, Turkey’s long-standing effort to join the European Union is all but dead, while the European bloc experiences its own existential crisis.

While NATO has traditionally followed a hands-off approach to Greek-Turkish differences, preferring to counsel both sides to find “mutually acceptable” compromises, the US has often chosen a pro-active stance which, in the case of the Imia crisis, averted a clash of arms between the two countries.

This stability norm, however, continues to experience stresses because of Erdogan's pugnacious stance vis-à-vis anyone he feels is opposing Turkey's "regional power status" and Ankara's "rightful" demands for "respect." Erdogan's tactics have already caused many in the Western alliance to recoil at his "[destabilizing policies](#)" and, even, call for [tossing Turkey out of NATO](#).

Erdogan appears hardly affected by this growing Western disaffection. He repeatedly clashed with Germany, he declared Turkey "[does not need](#)" the European Union, and he continues to claim his self-declared precedence as the potential *padishah* (ruler, sultan) of global Islam.

More recently, Erdogan [announced](#) the American recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of the state of Israel is "null and void" and described Israel, a former close ally, "the perfect invader state." In a sign of European dissatisfaction over his tactics, French President Emmanuel Macron let Erdogan [know](#) "there is no chance of progress towards Turkey joining the European Union at present."

With Erdogan's schemes in Syria defeated, and with the rise of Russia as the deciding power in the Syrian civil war, the Turkish president has unsuccessfully maneuvered to confer "on equal status" with President Putin only to be quietly relegated to a "friendly interlocutor" status without the desired diplomatic and "great power" recognition.

4. USA, GREECE, TURKEY

With Erdogan alternating between revisionist and anti-West outbursts of grandeur and diplomatic acrobatics with countries like Russia and Iran; and a developing, but still unclear, global American narrative under the Trump administration, questions arise as to whether American interventionism to stop escalation between Greece and Turkey would be affected.

In the traditionalist view, Washington has only to gain by offering its "good services" to avert open conflict between the two nominal allies. Events like the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, Iran's increasing role in the Middle East crisis, the refugee crisis, and the perennial conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, not to mention Erdogan's ascendancy and Russia's expanding activities, call for a stable Western anchor in the region, a role Greece can supposedly fulfill.

In a less optimistic interpretation, the Trump administration's still developing re-definition of American strategic interests is cause for concern. North Korean brinkmanship and the spat with Pakistan, not to mention Erdogan's outburst over Jerusalem, contribute to the fears of those who see risks developing because of fundamental and "unconventional" shifts in American posture under the new president.

Erdogan being unable to strike a positive balance with the Trump administration adds to the pessimists' view. A momentary thaw in September 2017, with the US and Turkish presidents

agreeing [“to strengthen ties.”](#) has been succeeded by yet another [Turkish tirade](#) against the US upon an American court finding a Turkish-Iranian banker guilty in a case of breaching Iran sanctions allegedly implicating Erdogan’s inner circle as well as the Turkish president personally.

The Greek government, on the other hand, has next to no options to influence these shifting trends. Greece remains under strict monitoring from its EU lenders and with an economy in tatters after eight years of steep decline unprecedented in economic history. With a sovereign debt still ballooning despite crippling austerity measures, and inability to legislate without “discreet” monitoring by, and approval of, its lenders, Greece has been described as Europe’s [“economic protectorate.”](#)

5. ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION CRISIS

Greece remains vulnerable to illegal immigration flows from Turkey. Summer 2015 proved beyond doubt Turkey’s capability to cause strategic disruption of Greek security by allowing the uncontrolled movement of aliens, termed “migrants” and “refuges,” across the narrows separating the Anatolian coast from the larger Greek Aegean islands.

A hastily brokered EU-Turkey agreement to reduce the flows has brought temporary relief, but the threat remains. Ankara exploits illegal immigration as both a tool of [political blackmail](#) and [“black” propaganda](#) accusing Greece of mistreating apprehended undocumented aliens. Pro-Erdogan media skillfully exploit [token action](#) against those trying to cross into Greece to highlight Turkey righteous abiding by the EU-Turkey agreement.

In 2015, the European Union encouraged Greece’s northern neighbors to seal their borders and thus turn Greece into a holding pen for illegal immigrants who succeed in crossing into Europe from Turkey. This EU initiative interrupted the unwanted flows of undocumented aliens to northern European countries, but created a growing security and social threat for Greece as desperate aliens, cut off from the corridors to Western Europe, become frustrated and prone to violence. Ankara’s propaganda also benefits from the incessant hammering of Greece by NGOs [decrying living conditions](#) at the so-called “hot spots” where asylum seekers are held.

Subversion by illegal immigration remains the most potent Turkish weapon against Greece short of actual war. In this, Turkey is helped by the European Union in the role of Pontius Pilate ignoring the Greek condition and continuing to quarrel over a quota system of distributing illegal migrants throughout member states, which has already [collapsed](#).

6. BALANCE OF FORCES

A possible Greek-Turkish war has been continually at the center of assessment of Greek-Turkish relations since the 1974 Turkish invasion and amputation of Cyprus. The fall of the Turkish military and the rise of a religiously motivated Erdogan has introduced additional negative elements in the Greek-Turkish equation.

The Syrian civil war has demonstrated how Erdogan is willing [to ally](#) himself with Islamic fanatics in pursuit of Turkey's strategic interests – while all the while professing support for Western anti-terrorist policies.

Ankara hesitated little to plunge into the Syrian war by sending troops to battle US-supported Kurdish forces and intrude into Iraq professing its willingness “to help” that country deal with the terrorist threat – prompting Baghdad [to threaten Turkey with war](#) if Ankara did not withdraw its forces.

The alleged coup of July 2016, and the subsequent referendum that narrowly allowed Erdogan to [choke democracy](#) and inaugurate his project of becoming “president for life,” introduced more destabilizing elements in Greek-Turkish relations. Erdogan's nationalistic harangues, addressing his Islamic conservative flock, need a target. And since Turkey's room to maneuver in any other direction but to the west, Greece continues to offer the most convenient bull's eye.

Erdogan's declared intention to undo the Lausanne Treaty should not be taken lightly. His plans to restore an Ottoman past in Syria and Iraq now defeated, the Aegean appears the next natural target for Ankara's self-appointed protector of all Sunnis.

This Turkish objective benefits from the traditional NATO reluctance to limit Turkish provocations in the Aegean, a tendency that has not diminished despite Erdogan's dictatorial tendencies, his flirting with Russia, and his open warfare with the European Union.

Although the Turkish president has succeeded in infuriating and frustrating significant majorities in the West, there are still strong “strategic expert” communities in both the US and Europe calling upon Western leaders “not to lose Turkey.”

In military terms, and although the Turkish economy is weakening, Erdogan continues to push an [ambitious armaments program](#) to make his country self-sufficient. Although this program has been [criticized](#) as unrealistic and financially irresponsible, Turkey's rearmament efforts could outpace anything that Greece can accomplish in modernizing its own weapons inventory in the next decade. Stranded in its EU austerity-hobbled bailout straightjacket, and without any funding resources to aggressively modernize its armed forces, *Greece may soon face dangerous odds in the Aegean.*

7. WAR OR JUST “HOT INCIDENTS”?

The constant Turkish efforts to foment a “hot incident” in the Aegean is, so far, limited to shows of force and constant violations of territorial seas and airspace. By necessity, Greece limits itself to the usual diplomatic protests and calls upon the “international community” to support “international law” in the Aegean.

“Hot incidents,” however, have the tendency to escalate either by commission or omission. The Imia crisis demonstrated how escalation may ensue and what is required to arrest disintegration into full conflict. In the present environment, however, the critical controlling factor, i.e. American intervention, may be less certain than in previous crises.

Greece and the US have been working in improving and expanding their defense cooperation, especially regarding the strategic naval base at Souda Bay, Crete. With instability and violence growing in the Middle East, and Turkey involved in its neo-Ottoman ambitions, Greece appears the only bulwark in the Eastern Mediterranean controlling the Aegean Sea lines of communication and serving, along with the Republic of Cyprus, as a key outpost for the security of Israel guaranteed by the US. Thus, the reasonable expectation, in case of a “hot incident,” would be repetition of the American initiatives like those during the Imia crisis.

However, the current global shift in US foreign and security policy should be cause for caution. President Trump’s idiosyncratic approach to foreign relations has confused experts and governments alike. On the positive side, the president’s “America First” approach seems to predict a strong American reaction to any Turkish attempt to upset the balance in the Aegean and, by extension, cause dangerous upheaval endangering American interests. On the negative side, questions about whether the president and his key advisers, including the secretaries of state and defense, are on the same page, especially during rapidly evolving crises, could be reasons for concern.

8. CONCLUSION

Thanks to the sovereign debt crisis and the EU “bailout,” Greece faces a precarious situation. To add insult to injury, Europe’s “solidarity” in managing the illegal immigration crisis has highlighted Greece’s position as an “outback” peripheral member state that is inexpensively supported with words but *refused any concrete and concerted help or relief*.

Contrary to what many Greek “realists” claim, the Turkish threat remains strong and growing. Greece’s options in trying to defend against this menace are limited. *Greek political divisions and perennial instability add to fears of a crisis that would not be contained.*

To the extent possible, Greece should continue expanding and strengthening its security cooperation with the US, especially considering the EU’s perennial confusion and indecision on

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foreign and security affairs. If push comes to shove, and reminiscing how Europe acted when Yugoslavia disintegrated, *Greece's hopes will rest, almost entirely, on a strong Greek-American security relationship.*