

Between Erdogan, Mitsotakis, and Biden: The Evolving Ankara-Athens-Washington Triangle

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The declaration by Turkey’s President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, on May 23, 2022 that Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis “no longer exists for him” constitutes a new low in the tense relationship between Turkey and Greece. This is in sharp contrast not only to Ankara’s previous attempt to lower the tensions between the two states but also to Turkey’s “charm offensive” toward several Middle East states. Beyond economic and domestic considerations is the Turkey-Greece-US triangle and the sense in Ankara that the record warmth in US-Greece relations is at the expense of Turkey. The growing tensions between Turkey and Greece complicate Israel’s need to balance its recent rapprochement with Turkey and its strong relations with Athens and Nicosia.

The declaration by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on May 23, 2022 that Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis “no longer exists for him” marks a new low in the tense relationship between Turkey and Greece. The insult compounds the recent Turkish violations of Greek airspace, more confrontational than in the past, and comes after a seemingly successful path to rapprochement between the two countries, though now, within only weeks, shattered.

The ongoing tensions of the historic Greek-Turkish conflict were evident once again from 2018 to 2020. Due to the increased attractiveness of the Eastern Mediterranean given its energy potential, the issue of maritime borders resurfaced yet again. The dispute over the legality of Greece's militarization of the Aegean Islands, the resurgence of the Cyprus question, and conflicting claims concerning the maritime borders all constitute interrelated events resulting in a military standoff, which has not been seen since 1996.

2021 marked an abrupt turning point where Athens and Ankara, which had found itself isolated on both the regional and international levels, agreed to resume exploratory talks after a five-year hiatus to defuse this crisis. However, after Mitsotakis and Erdogan met in a seemingly constructive meeting in Istanbul in March 2022, the clock has now rolled back to 2020. Following the increasingly provocative violations of Greek airspace by the Turkish Air Force, the Greek government decided to exclude the planned Turkish participation in the NATO drill Tiger Meet in Greece. Ankara protested by claiming that the Greek side was the first to violate Turkish airspace. Furthermore, some 600 migrants were stopped by the Greek coast guard while trying to cross the Aegean from Turkey, reigniting Athens's accusation that Ankara breaches its side of the 2016 EU migration deal.

Erdogan's rhetoric regarding Mitsotakis comes directly on the heels of the Greek Prime Minister's three-day visit to the US in mid-May, which culminated with his address in front of a joint session of Congress (the first Greek Prime Minister ever to do so). This visit is exemplary of improved Greece-US relations, and of the more positive Greek attitude toward NATO. For a long time, the Greek approach was characterized by fundamental skepticism toward the American presence in the region, even though Athens has been a member of the Western defense alliance since 1952. The existence of a strong US-skeptic left in Greece, which did not forget the American support for the Greek junta from 1967 to 1974, as well as Washington's limited involvement throughout the conflict between Athens and Ankara – as both are NATO members – posed a significant challenge to Greek-US relations for a considerable period. In tandem, even during the Cold War, Greeks have shared cultural and economic ties with Russia, which is seen as particularly closely connected on the level of religion.

Greece's turn toward Washington, leaving its decades-long stance behind, reflects developments on the international stage. First, the positive relationship with Moscow has deteriorated rapidly since 2018, when Russia was accused of meddling in Greece, at a time when the admission of Macedonia – present-day North Macedonia – to NATO was under negotiation. In addition, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Greek-Russian relations have recently reached a low point, when the death of 12

civilians from the Greek minority on the Ukrainian Black Sea coast as a result of Russian bombardment led to public outrage in Greece. Athens's sharp alignment with Washington and NATO, including the clear stance by Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias "to welcome Sweden and Finland to the NATO family," consequently represents the inverse of the perception of Moscow.

Simultaneously, in many respects Greece-US relations mirror Turkey-US relations. Thus while relations between Athens and Washington have never been better, Ankara and Washington do not seem able to resolve several contentious issues. Indeed, despite some improvement as a consequence of the war in Ukraine, the list of issues in dispute between Turkey and the US remains. As Turkey's objection to Sweden and Finland's bid to join NATO exemplifies, Ankara's moves that defy some of its Western partners' expectations are a recurring phenomenon. From its perspective, Ankara resents being taken for granted in NATO and has a sense that there is not enough understanding of its security needs, especially concerning the PKK and PKK-affiliated groups. The fact that even purchasing F-16 and F-16 modernization kits from the US has proven challenging, not to mention its expulsion from the F-35 project following its decision to buy S-400 air defense systems from Russia, is understood in Ankara as if Turkey is singled out and treated unjustly.

In turn, Washington-Athens and Washington-Ankara bilateral relations impact each other as well. Mitsotakis efforts in the US appear to be a way to counterbalance Turkey, which displayed a considerable diplomatic effort in the Eastern Mediterranean region last year. Ankara's rapprochement with several stakeholders in recent months, including Jerusalem, has been monitored carefully by Athens. At the same time, the Greek Prime Minister intended in his visit, planned since 2020, to fill the gap created by the ongoing tensions between Turkey and the US. Mitsotakis' announcement that his country would try to enter the F-35 program, his references in Congress to Turkish violations of the Greek airspace, and his calls for lawmakers to be cautious in "their defense procurement decisions concerning the Eastern Mediterranean" have been interpreted in Turkey as anti-Turkish moves, which explains Erdogan's latest words on the Greek Prime Minister. More generally, while obviously one of the main reasons

Washington has improved its relations with Athens has been the need to find a substitute and a backup for some of the US needs in the region that were previously fulfilled by Turkey, Ankara resents Greece's active attempt to lure the US to rely more on Athens.

The rising tensions between Turkey and Greece lie in contrast with Turkey's "charm offensive" toward other actors in the regional system such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt. What might explain this different approach?

First, the sense of "communicating vessels" in Ankara concerning the links between Greece-US and Turkey-US relations is singular and does not apply to other regional powers. The common membership in NATO, the feeling of competition to gain advantages from the US, a tense shared history, and important unsolved issues bring about a configuration that creates regular tensions and is not found elsewhere in Ankara's bilateral relations.

Second, contrary to the Gulf states, whose rapprochement with Turkey has a strong economic dimension, the likelihood of Greece providing Turkey with significant additional foreign direct investment is negligible. Moreover, some of the points of contention between Ankara and Athens refer to issues that have economic significance, such as the delimitation of exclusive economic zones.

Finally, at the domestic level, the approaching 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections also influence Erdogan's decisions. Few issues have a more unifying effect on the Turkish public than the Greek-Turkish conflict and the Turkish resentment toward Greek (and Greek-Cypriot) claims for naval exclusive economic zones. The Blue Homeland doctrine, developed by military and governmental circles in Ankara and which summarizes Turkey's maximalist claims in the Eastern Mediterranean, has become a tool for mobilizing Turkish public opinion around what is seen as the defense of Turkey's legitimate rights and the country's sovereignty.

More generally, as the country's deteriorating economic situation has created much resentment within the Turkish population against the government, and as the polls point to a possible defeat of Erdogan and his coalition in 2023, the Turkish government is making wider use of nationalist feelings to strengthen its position. This can be seen in Ankara's threats to

intensify its operation against the Kurdish forces in northern Syria and northern Iraq and in the Eastern Mediterranean too. By doing so, Erdogan tries to increase public support for himself and for Turkey's nationalist party, which is a key ally for the Turkish President and risks exclusion from parliament after the 2023 elections.

Turkey-Greece tensions come at a time when Turkey and Israel seek to improve relations, adding another layer of difficulty to Jerusalem's attempt to balance its relationship with the Republic of Cyprus and Greece and its relationship with Turkey. Israeli policymakers would do well to update Athens and Nicosia faithfully and openly on any new developments vis-à-vis Ankara. The harsh Turkish rhetoric against Greece is also a warning sign that Turkey's foreign policy restart comes with many limitations, and accordingly, Israel should demonstrate caution. In addition, Jerusalem should consider how it ought to react in case the tensions between Greece and Turkey escalate to a showdown in the Eastern Mediterranean, a region of strategic value for Israel. While the current configuration makes any Israeli alleviation effort unlikely to have a positive impact on the situation, Israel should think of ways to support, directly or indirectly, the efforts to stabilize the situation of its regional allies.

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