

Analyzing the Aegean Sea Crisis between Greece and Turkey and Its Implications for Regional Stability

Giorgi Koberidze

Georgian Institute of Public Affairs

Assistant Professor

Tbilisi, Georgia

Abstract

The Aegean Sea crisis between Greece and Turkey has been a longstanding issue characterized by historical animosities, territorial disputes, and conflicting interpretations of international agreements. Tensions have escalated in recent times, raising concerns about its implications for regional stability and international relations. This academic article examines the causes and implications of the Aegean Sea crisis, focusing on the strategic significance of the region, economic interests, and geopolitical complexities. The article analyzes recent incidents, including airspace violations and militarization, and explores the potential consequences of rising tensions for NATO and the European Union. Additionally, it delves into the diplomatic efforts and calls for de-escalation from international actors, emphasizing the need for peaceful dispute resolution through sustained dialogue. The paper concludes with a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted approach required to resolve the Aegean Sea crisis, encompassing diplomacy, adherence to international law, and the engagement of Track II initiatives to bridge societal divides.

Keywords: Aegean Sea crisis, Greece, Turkey, territorial disputes, geopolitical complexities, NATO, international law, peaceful dispute resolution, regional stability.

Introduction:

The Eastern Mediterranean region has long been a crossroads of civilizations, history, and geopolitics. Amidst the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis that dominates Europe's eastern borders, tensions have been steadily escalating between two NATO allies, Greece and Turkey, over territorial and airspace claims in the Aegean Sea. The Aegean Sea, is not only historically significant as the cradle of Greek and Western Turkish civilizations, but also strategically crucial as a commercial hub connecting three continents - Asia, Africa, and Europe.

The Aegean islands have been a longstanding point of contention between Greece and Turkey since the early twentieth century. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the modern borders of both nations were established through international treaties. However, the specific status of many Aegean islands remained undefined, leading to ongoing disputes over ownership and control. Since the 1970s, Athens and Ankara have found themselves at odds over maritime issues in the Aegean Sea, with both nations asserting rival claims over borders in the region. The root causes of this longstanding Aegean Sea crisis can be traced back to historical animosity, the demilitarized status of Eastern Aegean islands, disputes over delimitation of territorial waters and the Continental Shelf, and frequent airspace violations. These contentious issues have led to a series of incidents and military posturing, further fueling the tensions between the two nations.

Tensions between the two countries have intensified in recent years due to various factors, including the discovery of significant natural gas reserves in the region and the Europe-wide

refugee crisis. The presence of natural gas has raised the stakes, with Turkey asserting that islands like Kastellorizo should fall under its control due to their proximity to the gas fields.

One such island at the center of this dispute is Kastellorizo, located in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, just 2 kilometers from the Turkish coast and part of the Dodecanese islands. Italy ceded Kastellorizo to Greece in 1947 as part of the Treaty of Paris. However, Turkey has consistently claimed that the island rightfully belongs to its territory, supported by its proximity to the Turkish coast and its continental shelf area according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Another point of contention is the uninhabited island of Imia, known as Kardak in Turkish, situated between Kalymnos, Greece, and the Turkish coast. This island triggered a crisis in 1996, with both countries deploying military forces to the area (Pratt & Schofield, 1996). Though the crisis was resolved through diplomatic efforts, disputes over the island persist.

The ongoing refugee crisis has further complicated the situation. The Aegean Sea serves as a major route for refugees and migrants attempting to reach Europe, leading to accusations against both Greece and Turkey for exploiting the crisis for political gains.

Additionally, accusations of airspace violations and threatening rhetoric from Turkish military planes toward Athens have become increasingly common, fostering a perception of each other as rivals. This perception is shared by both governments and oppositions, reducing the prospects of successful negotiations.

Recent incidents in the Aegean Sea crisis have added fuel to the fire. In August 2022, Turkish Defence Ministry sources claimed that Greek S-300 air defense systems radar-locked NATO AWACS aircraft and Turkish F-16s during a military exercise. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's accusations against Greece of militarizing islands near the Turkish coast and Greece's swift response have rekindled long-standing hostilities between the two nations.

The implications of the rising tensions are far-reaching. NATO member countries are concerned that these escalating hostilities could undermine the Alliance's unity, making it more challenging to counter external threats, particularly in light of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis. Additionally, the crisis provides opportunities for external actors, such as Russia, to exert influence in the region, further complicating the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean.

The economic partnership between Greece and Turkey, which has seen considerable growth in recent years, stands at risk due to the escalating friction over their dominance in the Aegean Sea. Sectors such as bilateral trade and tourism have already been impacted, raising concerns about the potential consequences for the region's economic stability.

As tensions continue to rise, experts express concern about the potential for a military conflict between the two NATO member countries. Although both sides claim to seek a peaceful resolution, the region's increasing militarization remains worrisome. With national elections approaching in both nations, there's a tendency to flex muscles, both verbally and militarily, to appeal to nationalistic sentiments and maintain positions of power. While war between Greece and Turkey is highly unlikely due to their NATO membership, the heightened tensions and hostile rhetoric still have detrimental effects on both Athens and Ankara's stability.

Causes of the Aegean Sea Crisis

The Aegean Sea crisis between Greece and Turkey has deep historical roots and is characterized by a complex interplay of territorial disputes and differing interpretations of international agreements.

The historical context plays a significant role in shaping the Aegean Sea dispute. Greece and Turkey have a long history of conflict, marked by their independence wars against each other and the development of their national identities in opposition to one another. The legacy of

past territorial losses and disputes has contributed to the persistent rivalry and mistrust between the two countries. Key historical agreements such as the Lausanne Peace Treaty of 1923, the Montreux Convention of 1936, and the Paris Peace Treaties of 1947 have shaped the territorial boundaries and demilitarized status of certain islands in the Aegean Sea. However, differing interpretations of these treaties continue to be a source of contention (Thomas Falk, 2022).

The issue of the breadth of territorial waters in the Aegean Sea has been a longstanding point of disagreement. Both Greece and Turkey have claimed a 6-nautical-mile territorial sea in the region since 1936. While the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) allows states to extend their territorial sea up to 12 nautical miles from the shore, the extension of territorial waters beyond 6 miles in the Aegean Sea is highly contentious. This extension could significantly impact maritime boundaries and the rights of access to the high seas, making it unacceptable to Turkey and a potential cause for conflict. (Stamouli, 2022)

The Aegean Continental Shelf has become a major point of contention between Greece and Turkey since the discovery of oil and natural gas reserves in the region. The lack of a delimitation agreement between the two nations has led to overlapping claims over potential drilling areas. This competition for hydrocarbon wealth has heightened tensions and resulted in both countries undertaking seismic surveys and exploration activities in contested waters. The absence of clear agreements on the continental shelf's boundaries adds further complexity to the dispute.

The demilitarized status of the Eastern Aegean islands has been a significant element in the political balance between Greece and Turkey. Ankara has expressed concerns over the militarization of these islands, arguing that it violates the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and the 1947 Paris Treaty. Turkey claims that the islands were ceded to Greece on the condition of remaining demilitarized. On the other hand, Greece contends that its policy of militarizing

these islands is a right of self-defense, given their strategic location and proximity to potential threats.

Airspace violations over the Aegean Sea have been a recurring issue between Greece and Turkey. Both sides have accused each other of conducting flights near or over their coasts, leading to heightened tensions and military responses. Frequent airspace violations have added to the climate of mistrust and have the potential to escalate into more significant incidents.

Implications of the Aegean Sea Crisis:

The rising tensions between Greece and Turkey over the Aegean Sea have far-reaching implications, both regionally and internationally.

The Aegean Sea crisis adds to the security challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean region. The increasing militarization and military exercises by both Greece and Turkey in the area raise the risk of accidental clashes or miscalculations that could escalate into a full-blown conflict. This situation not only puts the safety and stability of the two nations at risk but also has the potential to involve other regional actors and exacerbate existing geopolitical tensions.

As NATO allies, Greece and Turkey are expected to cooperate and maintain solidarity within the alliance. However, the escalating Aegean Sea crisis has raised concerns among other NATO member countries that this internal conflict could undermine the alliance's unity. At a time when NATO faces external threats, such as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis, internal divisions could weaken the collective response to common challenges.

The crisis provides opportunities for external actors, particularly Russia, to gain influence in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Both Greece and Turkey are vulnerable to Russian influence operations, and heightened tensions between the two countries can further erode NATO and EU cohesion. This could complicate efforts to coordinate policies and respond effectively to shared security concerns.

The Aegean Sea crisis poses risks to the economic partnership between Greece and Turkey. The bilateral trade between the two countries has seen significant growth in recent years, but escalating friction over maritime boundaries could adversely affect trade volumes. The tourism industry, a vital lifeline for both nations, is also impacted as the crisis intertwines with geopolitics, potentially deterring tourists and undermining economic stability in the region.

The Eastern Mediterranean region is rich in oil and natural gas reserves, and the crisis has implications for energy exploration and infrastructure development. Both states are actively conducting search operations. The competition between Greece and Turkey over maritime boundaries and the Continental Shelf creates uncertainty for international energy companies operating in the region. Potential conflicts or prolonged tensions could deter investment and delay energy projects, impacting the energy security and economic interests of countries relying on Eastern Mediterranean resources. In 2020 naval collision involving the Kemal Reis and the elderly Greek frigate, Limnos, underscores the simmering hostilities in the region. (The Economist, 2020) The situation did not improve after that.

The rising tensions between Greece and Turkey have economic implications, affecting trade, tourism, and investment. Both countries have significant economic ties, and any disruptions in trade or diplomatic relations could result in trade volume reductions and financial losses for businesses in both nations. The tourism industry, in particular, is vulnerable to the crisis, as travelers may be deterred by the perceived instability in the region.

The Aegean Sea crisis presents a challenging diplomatic situation for international actors seeking to mediate and de-escalate tensions. Engaging with both Greece and Turkey to find peaceful solutions requires careful diplomacy and the willingness of both parties to compromise. International bodies such as the United Nations, the European Union, and NATO may play a role in encouraging dialogue and promoting conflict resolution mechanisms.

The crisis also has implications for the management of refugees and migration flows in the region. Turkey hosts a significant number of refugees, and any escalation of tensions with

Greece could exacerbate existing migration challenges. The situation may lead to potential security and humanitarian concerns, affecting both nations and the broader European continent.

Diplomatic Efforts and Calls for De-escalation:

Amidst the rising tensions in the Aegean Sea crisis, there have been diplomatic efforts to address the longstanding issues between Greece and Turkey. International actors, including NATO, the United Nations, and the European Union, have urged both parties to exercise restraint, avoid provocative actions, and engage in dialogue to de-escalate the situation. These diplomatic efforts are crucial in preventing further escalation and finding peaceful solutions to the disputes. Some of the key diplomatic initiatives and calls for de-escalation are as follows:

NATO Involvement:

As both Greece and Turkey are NATO allies, the involvement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has been significant in managing the crisis. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has emphasized the importance of resolving differences through peaceful means and maintaining open lines of communication. NATO serves as a forum for dialogue and conflict resolution, and its mediation efforts have been aimed at reducing tensions between the two countries.

United Nations Involvement:

The United Nations has been closely monitoring the situation in the Aegean Sea and has emphasized the need for peaceful resolution of disputes. The UN's involvement in the crisis has been focused on promoting dialogue and facilitating negotiations between Greece and Turkey. The UN has called on both parties to adhere to international law and agreements to avoid any actions that could lead to further escalation.

European Union's Role:

As regional neighbors and potential EU members, Greece and Turkey's relations are of interest to the European Union. The EU has urged both countries to resolve their differences peacefully and in accordance with international law. The EU's involvement has also included support for confidence-building measures between the two countries and initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue.

Conclusion

The Aegean Sea crisis between Greece and Turkey is a complex and deeply rooted issue that has been simmering for decades, fueled by historical animosities, territorial disputes, and conflicting interpretations of international agreements. Tensions have escalated in recent times, raising concerns among the international community about the potential for further conflict and the implications for regional stability.

The Aegean Sea's strategic significance, with its historical and cultural importance, vast commercial potential, and abundant oil reserves, has elevated its status to a focal point in Greek-Turkish ties. Both countries have staked rival claims over the region, leading to disputes over territorial waters, airspace violations, and the militarization of the Eastern Aegean islands. These contentious issues have often resulted in military posturing, heightened rhetoric, and a deterioration of diplomatic relations between the two NATO allies.

The implications of the rising tensions in the Aegean Sea crisis are far-reaching and multifaceted. At the international level, the discord between Greece and Turkey threatens to undermine the cohesion of NATO and the European Union, presenting an opportunity for external actors to exploit the divisions and gain influence in the region. With Russia's assertiveness in the Eastern Mediterranean, the crisis further complicates efforts to present a united front against potential threats.

The economic partnership between Greece and Turkey has also been affected by the escalating tensions, with potential repercussions for trade and tourism. The Aegean region, once a vital lifeline for both countries' tourism industries, now faces challenges as geopolitical considerations intersect with economic interests. This confluence has led to a decrease in bilateral trade and raised concerns about the future of tourism in the region.

Diplomatic efforts and calls for de-escalation from international actors, including NATO, the United Nations, and the European Union, have emphasized the importance of resolving differences through peaceful means and maintaining open lines of communication. The involvement of neutral mediators and adherence to international law are seen as critical components in finding lasting solutions to the disputes.

The path to resolving the Aegean Sea crisis requires a multifaceted approach that addresses historical grievances, territorial disputes, and energy resource claims. Diplomatic dialogue, confidence-building measures, and cooperation on economic ventures are essential to foster an environment of trust and mutual understanding. Compliance with international law, particularly the UNCLOS, can provide a framework for resolving maritime disputes and defining territorial boundaries.

Furthermore, the engagement of Track II diplomacy initiatives and people-to-people contacts can help bridge the divides between Greek and Turkish societies, contributing to a more conducive environment for conflict resolution. By prioritizing conflict prevention and crisis management, NATO can play a constructive role in facilitating communication and cooperation between the two nations.

In the pursuit of lasting peace, both Greece and Turkey must transcend the zero-sum approach and recognize the potential for mutually beneficial solutions. Despite the complexities and challenges, peaceful dispute resolution through sustained dialogue remains pivotal in avoiding an open conflict and forging a new era of cooperation in the Aegean Sea region.

Bibliography

A row between Turkey and Greece over gas is raising tension in the eastern Mediterranean.

The Economist. Retrieved July 25, 2023, from

<https://www.economist.com/international/2020/08/20/a-row-between-turkey-and-greece-over-gas-is-raising-tension-in-the-eastern-mediterranean>

Might Turkey seize a tiny Greek island? *The Economist*. Retrieved July 25, 2023, from

<https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/01/12/might-turkey-seize-a-tiny-greek-island>

Ortolland, P. D. *The Greco-Turkish dispute over the Aegean Sea: A possible solution?*

Retrieved July 25, 2023, from <https://www.diploweb.com/The-Greco-Turkish-dispute-over-the.html>

Turkey and Greece flex their muscles over rocks in the Aegean. *The Economist*. Retrieved

July 25, 2023, from <https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/02/09/turkey-and-greece-flex-their-muscles-over-rocks-in-the-aegean>

Stamouli, N. (2022, December 29). Turkey renews threat of war over Greek territorial sea dispute. *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-mevlut-cavusoglu-threat-war-greece-territorial-sea-dispute/>

Falk, T. O. (n.d.). *Why Turkey, Greece remain on collision course over Aegean islands*.

Retrieved July 25, 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/6/20/why-turkey-greece-remain-on-collision-course-over-aegean-islands>

Pratt, M., & Schofield, C. (1996). *The Imia/Kardak Rocks Dispute in the Aegean Sea*.