



The Eurasia Center's European Program

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Greece and Türkiye Tensions in the Aegean Sea



View of the Aegean Islands from Outer Space, Photo Credit: NASA

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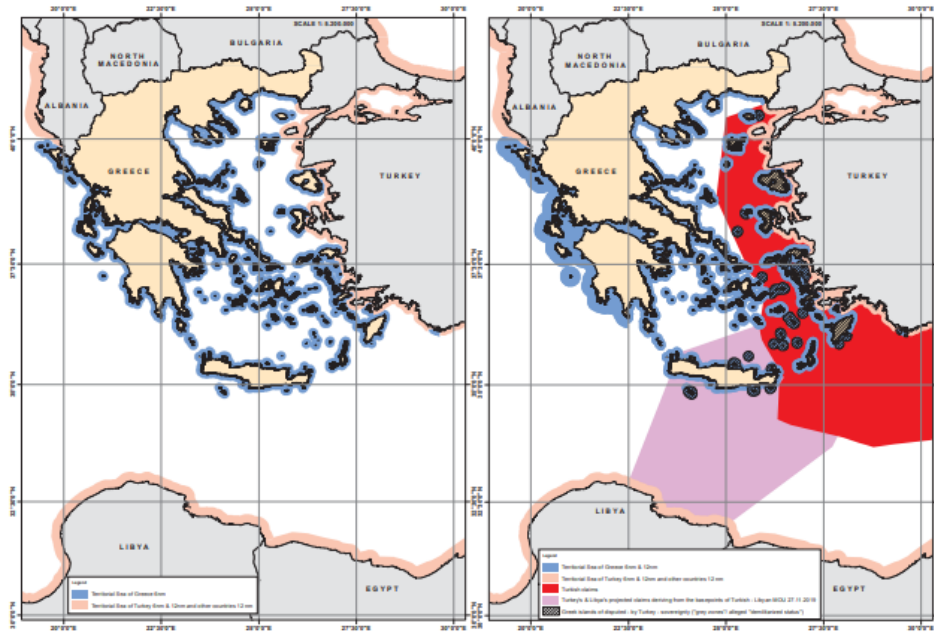
Tensions in the Aegean: Greece and Türkiye



Map of the Greek Aegean Islands Source: Wikipedia

The idea of war between Greece and Turkey is not a new one. There have been a myriad of times throughout history where tense words and actions have escalated into violent ones; be it 1919, 1821, 1453, or even 1260 BCE. Harsh words are yet again being thrown around, and the hydra of conflict threatens to rear its ugly head.

While Greece and Türkiye have many competing interests, the most pressing (for the time being) is the status of the Aegean and the islands that lay within it. The Aegean Sea, the small body of water that separates Greece from Türkiye, is full of various small islands and islets- which have belonged to both Greece and Türkiye (or their precursor states) throughout history. Their populations are often split, with their politics even more so.



MAP 16 - Comparative depiction of Turkish claims/designs 1972-2022

Through a comparison of Map No. 2 (1972) with Map No. 15 (2022) the extent of the escalation of Turkish claims over the last 50 years becomes crystal clear.

Map 16 shows Greek islands and Turkish claims. Source: Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The islands, including Lemnos, Samothrace, Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Ikaria, and the Dodecanese, have been demilitarized since 1923 as a result of the Treaty of Lausanne (except for the Dodecanese, which were instead demilitarized in 1947). The two nations have never been at ease with regard to this arrangement, both almost coming to blows in both 1987 and 1996. Once again, tensions are flaring, as the President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has accused Greece of occupying these islands. In addition, he has pledged that Türkiye will “do what is necessary.” This is following recent accusations that the Greek government has been sending arms to the islands - accusations that Athens has fully denied. This is just one example of recent tensions flaring between the two countries - Ankara has claimed that Greek anti-aircraft missiles locked onto Turkish jets, and while speaking on the anniversary of Victory Day, President Erdoğan called on Greece to “remember Izmir,” a major Turkish victory.

[This link](#) provides 16 different maps, directly from the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Map 16 is included above. The rest of the maps show various pieces of information important for understanding the context - including them all here

would be impossible. These maps, the Ministry claims, “document the extent of Turkish revisionism,” in order to show what the status quo is - and how it can be upended, if Erdoğan gets his way.



Flag of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Photo Credit: NATO

Both Greece and Türkiye are member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO. Article 5 of NATO ensures that if one member state is attacked, all members of NATO would consider it an attack on them. The idea of an inter-NATO war has been unheard of - and how it would impact the NATO Alliance is unknown. However, lines have already started being drawn - Emmanuel Macron, the President of France, has sworn to defend Greece if worst comes to worst - calling Erdoğan’s threats “unacceptable.”¹

It remains to be seen whether or not other nations (be they part of NATO or not) will pledge aid to Greece. Part of the reason Macron swore to back Greece up is the recent Strategic Partnership created in 2021- a relationship that few other countries share with Greece.

The issue of the posturing has also reached the United Nations General Assembly Security Council. Maria Theofili, Greece’s permanent representative to the

¹ <https://greekreporter.com/2022/09/13/macron-provocations-against-greece-unacceptable/>

United Nations, wrote a letter to the Assembly on the 6th of September.² Within the letter, she gives examples of some of the inflammatory language that President Erdoğan has recently utilized, calling on the Assembly to circulate the letter to the members of the General Assembly as well as condemning Erdoğan's actions. Such a UN Condemnation has not yet occurred - and is unlikely to, judging from the infrequency of United Nations Condemnations - the most recent one being the condemnation of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine.

At the 77th United Nations General Assembly, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis quoted Pericles in saying that "they must be willing to fight." In the speech, he emphasizes the shared diplomatic ties that Greece and Türkiye have and calls on Türkiye to de-escalate the situation. Calls that as of yet gone unheeded.

While tensions between Greece and Türkiye continue to grow, it is not assured that the two nations will go to war. Cooler heads may prevail, and the two countries may return to a state of peace.

² General Assembly Seventy-sixth session Agenda items 16 and 78 (a)



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