



Weekly Briefing

**Greece external relations briefing:
Greek-Turkish relations and the risk of a military accident
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Greek-Turkish relations and the risk of a military accident

After many years, Greek-Turkish relations are strained to a worrying level. The risk of a military accident is high. Ankara has announced it would proceed to drillings in maritime zones which it believes constitute part of its own continental shelf – in line with an accord in signed with Tripoli in November 2019. In such a scenario Greece will have no alternative but to react and stop the operation of Turkish vessels. The role of the US will be critical in that regard. Although the Greek government plays the American card, Washington counts on Ankara while historical experience suggests that Greece should not be particularly optimistic. More importantly, American priorities vis-à-vis Russia and China are rather different from Greece's foreign policy dilemmas regarding Turkey. The remaining months of 2020 will be difficult and highly significant for Greek-Turkish relations.

The evolution of relations with Turkey will be the most challenging theme for Greek foreign policy in the remaining part of 2020. The Turkish government has already announced it would start drillings in maritime zones of the Aegean or in the southern part of Crete that it regards as part of its own continental-shelf. Greece disagrees with the Turkish designations, has condemned the relevant MoU signed between Turkey and Libya in November 2019 and is determined to protect its sovereign rights. Having said that, the risk of a military accident is not excluded. It remains unclear how Athens will react should Ankara sends research ships indeed. But some statements are strong. Head of the Hellenic National Defense General Staff (GEETHA), Konstantinos Floros, has warned that Greece would not tolerate a violation of its sovereign rights.

Ambassador of Turkey to Greece Burak Ozugergin has given an interview in *Kathimerini* newspaper in which he says that Ankara has already informed Athens about its intention. His words are: 'You don't need to read between the lines. Our messages at every level are always open and straightforward. We do not like fait accomplis against us and we do not act in this manner either. We say what we do, and we do what we say.' Greek Minister of Defense has underlined that the presence of Turkish drill ships in Greek waters would be a violation of Greece's national sovereignty and the country will not allow it. Public comments do not generate much optimism about future developments. But diplomacy is not being always exerted publicly.

On 26 June, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and President Tayyip Erdogan held a phone conversation. This phone conversation has been considered an initial indication of their potential will to establish a channel communication in difficult times. The two leaders had met in December 2019 in London on the sidelines of the NATO summit. Their meeting was not particularly successful because of their serious disagreement on the Turkish-Libyan MoU. It has to be seen whether Mitsotakis and Erdogan will be able to prevent a military accident from happening. Although it is certainly positive that they spoke on the phone in a period of high tensions, it is difficult for the differences to be bridged. The question what will happen in the case of the navigation of Turkish vessels in alleged maritime zones, remains unanswered.

Obviously, the role of the US is highly important when Greek-Turkish relations are being examined. While Greek-American relations are currently flourishing, Turkey remains a critical strategic ally for the US – and of higher geopolitical significance. According to historical experience, Greece should not count on American support. Washington has not assisted Greece in its fair claim against the Turkish-Libyan MoU. When Mitsotakis visited US President Donald Trump last January, he failed to obtain the latter's support who is a regular interlocutor of Erdogan on several international affairs. It seems that Trump and Erdogan have agreed, among other things, for Turkey to take the US role in Syria. Additionally, the diplomatic language of the Department of State regarding the Turkish-Libyan maritime accord has been very careful. The word 'illegal' has not been used.

US Ambassador to Greece Geoffrey Pyatt has been publicly asked by journalists on how his country would act to respond to Turkish provocations. In an interview he gave to *Mega TV* on 27 May, for example, he said that it was unacceptable for NATO allies 'to engage in activities that can produce a military clash, accidental or otherwise, between two important NATO allies in a geopolitically important region'. He also explained that he was in regular contact with his counterpart in Ankara David Satterfield. And he went further by suggesting that 'if there were to be any sort of escalation, [...] the winner is Vladimir Putin'. The Embassy of Russia in Greece reacted to the last comment. An official tweet read: 'It is unacceptable that a foreign diplomat should allow himself something like that. The Ambassador clearly adopted this unacceptable attitude during his stint in Ukraine. The US is known for its chronic inability to solve differences between NATO members, which Moscow has no intention of exploiting. Contrary to the US, Russia has always been a factor of stability and peace in the region'.

In mid-June Mitsotakis travelled to Israel in his first visit to a foreign country after the novel coronavirus adventure. Greece hopes that Israel might be prepared to take its side in relations with Turkey. National security advisor Alexandros Diakopoulos gave an interview

i24News and said: ‘if Greece capitulates, if they manage to corner us and to put us out of the picture, then Israel at some point will suffer [because] Turkey will become a threat for [it], bigger than Iran]’. But for Greece to believe that another country – in this case, Israel – will solve its foreign policy problems is rather an illusion. Greece is not interested in joining Israel against the Palestinians or against Iran. And Israel is not interested in joining Greece against Turkey. The comment of Admiral Diakopoulos also reflects a weakness in understanding regional dynamics. Israel and Turkey are making some steps to restore their ties. Energy, trade and security in Syria are top on the agenda of bilateral talks.

From another perspective, the impact of COVID-19 on energy calculations cannot be ignored. The construction of the East-Med pipeline becomes very difficult. Energy companies – already hesitant in financing the project – will certainly refrain from doing so under current circumstances. Furthermore, the American support to the cooperation scheme of Greece, Israel and Turkey (3+1) has not materialized into concrete actions. Should the idea of the East-Med pipeline is abandoned, other options – including the potential construction of a pipeline connecting the Levantine Basin to Turkey – will gain ground. On the whole, the US believes that the East Med Gas Forum, where Greece, Israel, Cyprus, Egypt, Italy, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan participate, should be more inclusive and also welcome Turkey. Of course, the terms of dialogue for this to happen have not yet been clarified. Turkey pushes for talks with Greece insisting on its muscular approach and whereas Greece is prepared to concentrate only on the issue of the continental shelf. Obviously, the Cyprus Question is another thorn.

Greece also fails to efficiently interpret American foreign policy. Greek-Turkish relations are not a priority for Washington – as Athens wrongly estimates. By contrast, Washington sees Greece by focusing on Russia, and recently China, while Greece needs foreign investments. In so doing the US is expected to draw on the International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) that a few days ago expressed an interest in the Elefsina Shipyards. The DFC is America’s development bank and partners with the private sector to do business.

Conclusion

Two NATO member-states, Greece and Turkey, cannot solve their problems and the risk of a military accident is high in the coming months. The US wants to mediate and reduce tensions but it is unclear whether this diplomatic effort will produce results and if Turkish muscular foreign policy approach in the Eastern Mediterranean will be vindicated. The option

of dialogue is open but Athens and Ankara even disagree on what to discuss. The impact of COVID-19 on energy calculations rather favors Turkey because the construction of the East-Med pipeline becomes even more difficult. Washington is right in proposing the East Med Gas Forum to become more inclusive but terms on how this might be achieved in the future remain unclear. In the interim, Greece should be prepared for the worse-case in the Aegean without relying on wishful thinking. Comments made by Greek politicians and military officials aim at showing a degree of preparedness for a potential violation of the country's sovereign rights by Turkey.