



Weekly Briefing

**Greece external relations briefing:
Greek-Turkish relations under the light of the
77th UN General Assembly
Evelyn Karakatsani**

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.
 +36 1 5858 690
 office@china-cee.eu
 china-cee.eu

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Summary

The briefing analyzes the speeches of the Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis and the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the 77th United Nations General Assembly. The rhetoric President Tayyip Erdogan uses against Greece and the subsequent response of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in defense of Greek legitimate positions demonstrate the current status of high tensions in the bilateral relationship, while communication channels are arguably closed. Against this backdrop, the US and the EU call upon Turkey to stop its aggressive rhetoric, respect the territorial sovereignty of Greece and find a solution via diplomatic means. Greece is prepared to start dialogue with Turkey and stands ready for cooperation but remains hesitant as long as the other side threatens it with the usage of military means.

Introduction

During the 77th UN General Assembly the Greek and Turkish leaders had the opportunity of presenting the positions of the respective countries in front of 193 UN member states. Both leader's speeches were focused on the Ukrainian war, however, the references to the Greek-Turkish relations were numerous. On the one hand Erdogan's speech included serious allegations towards Greece, such as pushbacks of refugees in the Aegean Sea and discriminatory policies against the Turkish Muslim Minority. On the other hand, the speech of Mitsotakis was more focused inviting the Turkish leader and citizens to find a solution on the basis of respect to the international law and good neighbourly relations. However, Turkish violations of Greek airspace are increasing, as well as the aggressive and threatening rhetoric of the Turkish leadership towards Greece. It is urgent that a diplomatic de-escalation occurs in order to avoid a military crisis.

The speeches of the Greek and Turkish leaders

On the 17th of May 2022 the Greek PM K. Mitsotakis addressed the Joint Session of the US Congress. The 23rd of May 2022 the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, during a news conference following the weekly cabinet meeting stated that the Greek PM "no longer

exists”. He further stated “We had agreed to not include third countries in our dispute with him. Despite this, last week, he had a visit to the U.S. and talked at the Congress and warned them not to give F-16s to us”. He added “I will never agree to meet with him. We will continue our way with honourable politicians”. These statements were followed by an escalation of the Turkish provocative narrative towards Greece and tensions in the Aegean Sea. Consequently, the bridge of communication between the two countries has been further burdened. Under this context the two leaders traveled to New York in order to participate at the 77th UN General Assembly held from the 13th to 27th September 2022.

Specifically, on the 20th of September, President Erdogan delivered a speech on the podium of the UN General Assembly. It should be mentioned that numerous references to Greece were made. In particular, the Turkish leader stated, “Greece is increasing the extent of cruelty against immigrants in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean...Greece is turning the Aegean Sea into a graveyard for refugees with its unlawful and reckless pushbacks”. He further called the United Nations to “say no to these acts without mercy that constitute crimes against humanity”. These allegations concerning the immigration crisis were followed by statements of the Turkish president on the external frictions between the two countries. He noted “While Türkiye will defend its rights in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean until the end, it will never fall into the trap of those who follow a strategy of tension for the sake of their own political purposes” (2).

Erdogan further referred to the Cyprus issue by urging the international community to recognize the northern east part of Cyprus as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (2). It should be mentioned that UN Security Council in Resolutions 541 (1983) and 550 (1984) has characterized Turkish actions in Cyprus as secessionist and illegal acts and has called upon all states not to recognize the purported State of the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (3). The Turkish leader continued his speech by accusing Greece and mentioned “In addition to its inhumane pushbacks of irregular migrants in the Aegean Sea, Greece, a member of the European Union, has been pursuing discriminatory and oppressive policies against the Turkish Muslim Minority, in violation of its legal obligations. We hope that Greece will bring an end to all these wrongful practices and that the international organizations, starting with the European Union, will stop turning a blind eye to these inhumane and unlawful actions”(2).

Following the speech of President Erdogan, the 23rd of September, PM Mitsotakis addressed the United Nations National Assembly. In his speech, the Greek PM mentioned the Cyprus issue and stated “Ukraine is not the only country in post-war Europe to have been attacked. For nearly 50 years, Cypriots have lived on a divided island as the result of an illegal

invasion and a military occupation... But the international community must not ignore illegal Turkish attempts to impose a new fait-accompli on Cyprus, in particular in the fenced area of Varosha, as well as new and repeated violations of Cyprus' maritime zones and airspace". He further stressed the even more aggressive Turkish revisionist agenda in contrast to Greece's position to settle differences according with international law (4).

PM Mitsotakis from the podium of the UN General Assembly, acknowledged Turkey's important and constructive role as a NATO member and further welcomed Ankara's recent efforts led to a Ukrainian-Russian grain exports deal. On the other hand, the Greek PM stressed that Turkey plays a destabilizing role in the Eastern Mediterranean. In particular, he stated "And when it comes to Greece, Turkiye's leadership seems to have a strange fixation with my country. Their language is increasingly bellicose. They threaten that Turkiye will "come at night", if it so decides. This is the language of an aggressor, not a peacemaker...What is particularly alarming is the growing intensity of the threat. It is characterized by an escalation in aggressive rhetoric. Combined with a massive disinformation campaign. Multiple violations of Greece's sovereignty and sovereign rights at sea and in the air, the instrumentalization of migration flows, and unfortunately, a unilateral decision to refuse all high-level contacts". Mitsotakis explicitly mentioned that questioning sovereignty of Greek territory crosses a red line. However, he gave a direct message to the Turkish leadership and citizens by stating "Greece poses no threat to your country. We are not your enemies. We are neighbours. We value the many friendships between ordinary Greeks and Turks" (4).

Analysis of the positions of the two leaders

Analyzing the speeches of the two leaders and in the context of escalation of tensions between the two countries, it is evident that communication channels between the two countries are nonexistent. President's Erdogan speech to the UN General Assembly included numerous accusations against Greece for "crimes against humanity" and discrimination policies against the Turkish Muslim minority. He further called the international community to recognize the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is not accepted by the UN as well as the Greek government. Thus, his speech mainly focused on allegations against Greece and evidently showed that willingness for cooperation is not present at the moment. In addition, the speech to the UN reveals that the aggressive narrative towards Greece aims no more his internal audience but rather the international community and ally-countries to Turkey, participating in the UN General Assembly.

On his side, PM Mitsotakis via his speech stressed that the Turkish provocations towards Greece's territorial rights are a red line for the Greeks. He also mentioned the illegal occupation of Cyprus. However, Mitsotakis during his speech stressed that Greece is always open to dialogue and willing to settle any differences on the basis International Law. Furthermore, the PM praised Turkey as an important NATO member and a potential ally of Greece and EU and stressed that despite the differences between the two countries there is also the way of cooperation. It should also be mentioned that for the first time the PM addressed a direct message of friendship towards the Turkish leadership and citizens. Hence, the Greek PM focused his speech in responding to Erdogan's accusations but simultaneously highlighting the willingness of Greece to establish cooperation channels with Turkey.

Following the UN's Assembly speeches of the two leaders, a spokesperson for the US State Department in a written statement noted that at a time when Russia has again invaded a sovereign European state, statements that could increase tensions between NATO Allies are not particularly helpful" and added that the US encourage NATO allies to work together to maintain peace in the region and resolve disputes through diplomacy. In addition, it stated that Greece's sovereignty over these islands is not disputed and called all parties to refrain from rhetoric and actions that could further escalate tensions (5).

Furthermore, Peter Stano, lead spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security of the European Commission stated that "Greece is a member state of the EU, and the EU its member states have formulated very clearly a number of European Council conclusions, its expectations of Turkey to de-escalate, to be engaged in constructive de-escalation in order to advance the mutually beneficial constructive cooperation not only with Greece but with the EU as a whole". He further added "we expect that Turkey would cease threatening rhetoric and with steps that are not really conducive for de-escalation. This is the very well-established position of the EU and its member-states because the recent actions, provocations, rhetoric (are) contradicting the much-needed de-escalation" (6).

Conclusion

The increasing territorial violations, mainly of the Greek airspace, as well as the threatening rhetoric of Turkey towards Greece has raised obstacles in the relations of the two countries, as well as the communication between the Greek and Turkish leadership. The international community calls Turkey to respect the sovereign rights of Greece and both countries reach to a diplomatic solution. PM Mitsotakis, during his speech at the 77th UN

General Assembly openly declared that he is willing to communicate and cooperate with Turkey on the basis of respect of the international law. On the other hand, President Erdogan did not show the same willingness but rather focused his speech on posing allegations towards Greece. Nevertheless, the two leaders, as well as the EU and the US need to open communication channels and urgently start working towards a diplomatic solution over the disputes in the Aegean Sea. This is crucial for the stability and security of the region, as well as the prosperity of the two countries.

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