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**Greek - Turkish relations:  
A classic case of power competition towards a paradigm shift**

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**Abstract**

Bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey are one of the classic examples of state rivalry in the field of international relations. The interaction of the two states is mainly based on the doctrine of deterrence, within a crucial security dilemma in the region of South-Eastern Europe. Through a brief historical overview of their bilateral relations, the paper observes that their disputes over time remain unresolved, with the possibility of resolution seeming increasingly remote. This paper aims to go beyond the traditional realist analysis and take a critical approach to explore the causes of the conflictual relationship between the two states, highlighting the difference in the ontological identity of these countries and their mutual perception of the Other as an enemy. This article concludes that there is now a need for a new strategic understanding of bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey through a constructivist prism of a pragmatic pursuit of fair understanding and cooperation at the level of rules and institutions.

**Keywords:** Greek – Turkish relations, realism, conflict, constructivism, change, identity

**Introduction - Competitive and conflictual framework of relations**

The issue of the relations between Greece and Turkey is at the forefront of international relations analysis for the region of South-Eastern Europe. A macro-historical approach to the interaction between the two countries highlights the antagonistic and conflictual nature of the framework of their relations. We can succinctly describe the basic features of this conflictual framework and its construal by the fact that the dispute takes meaning from the notion that the national identity of the two countries has, to a large extent, been mutually constructed along an axis of opposition between them and its delimitation around the cornerstone of the Treaty of Lausanne, which is the foundation of bilateral relations between the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of Turkey, up to the present day. Within this context of antagonistic interrelation, it can be argued that the relations between Greece and Turkey are a classic example of a competition of powers within a sometimes more, sometimes less, anarchic international system for power and security, as rational political actors<sup>1</sup>.

**Brief historical context**

Looking at the issue from a pragmatic perspective, it is worth noting that Greek-Turkish relations are not only the expression of autonomous state behaviour at the external level, but also a reflection of the character and influence of the international system in which the two countries interact<sup>2</sup>. Thus, over time their relations have been characterized by alternating periods of tension and recession, reaching to date a condition of low political conflict, with bouts of high intensity conflicts. In attempting a brief account of their evolution, we note the existence of distinct periods of relations. From the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne until the end of the 1940s, the two countries established rudimentary friendly relations, while at the same time being in a process of early strategic positioning in the international system.

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<sup>1</sup> Ifantis (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Jackson and Sorensen (2016).

From the 1940s, and especially after the end of the Second World War, the two countries entered a phase of disciplined foreign policy, with no space for autonomous manoeuvring, reflecting the need for balance between the two superpowers and their spheres of influence, but also a crystallization of their need to develop security within their geopolitical space, which ultimately led to the emergence of their long-standing historical differences. From the 1960s until the end of the 1990s, the two countries were engaged in high-intensity interstate competition (culminating in the Cyprus crisis, Turkish oil exploration in the Aegean in 1976 and 1987, the Imia crisis in 1996), which intensified and acquired new dimensions as the change in the international system since 1990 brought the two countries' differences to the forefront with a new sense of urgency. A turning point in this period was the Helsinki Agreement and the promising optimism for Turkey's European course that it brought with it. The initial positive mood, however, quickly proved rather illusory, as Turkey's increasing slide towards an authoritarian regime removed the possibility of peaceful coexistence under the model of European democracies and left Greece facing an increasingly threatening neighbour. Indeed, throughout Erdogan's rule, Turkey has been constantly increasing the intensity of the conflict, promoting an organised revisionist policy in the Aegean, Thrace and Cyprus.

### **A conflict based on identity**

At the core of the relations between the two countries is the essence of their identity and self-perception, which is accompanied by a mutually negative construction of each other's identity. The national mythologies and collective trauma of each country are the defining elements of their more constructed and less natural national identities. The notion of the Other acts as the axis of opposition between the two countries. For the Greeks, Turkey is what Greece is not, i.e. uncivilized and barbaric, while for the Turks, Greece is what Turkey is not, i.e. traitors and nationalists.

To a large extent, in the public opinion of the two countries, but also at the level of diplomacy and foreign policy, the antagonism between the two countries is not only historical, but also inevitable. Their rivalry is the result of an existential faith to a primordial conflict that cannot be overcome.

In this light, the chances of resolving the differences between the two countries are reduced to diplomatic skirmishes and military operations, thus making it difficult to build positive trust and a common ground of understanding.

### **The dispute between the two states**

For Greece, its only difference with Turkey is the issue of the delimitation of the continental shelf and the EEZ, as it was established in 1973. Since then and around this matter, Turkey has been pursuing a maximalist policy of accumulating claims against Greece, which has resulted in a rapid escalation of tension between the two countries. As a result, Turkey's set of claims includes contesting Greece's legitimate sovereign right to extend its coastal zone to twelve nautical miles under the Law of the Sea, disputing Greek national airspace and maritime borders, disputing the Greek sovereignty over islands, challenging the responsibilities within the FIR Athens, disputing Greece's responsibilities within its area of responsibility for search and rescue matters and demanding the demilitarization of the islands of the East Aegean<sup>3</sup>.

Finally, the great puzzle of the Cyprus issue, which, although in a strictly narrow sense, is not a matter of bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey, but an international legal issue of invasion and occupation, is for both Greece and Turkey an always pending issue of historical responsibility, the solution of which is a prerequisite for the total resolution of the Greek-Turkish disputes.

It is clear from the above list of claims that Turkey is following an aggressive and assertive policy towards Greece and is on a course of direct and irreversible challenge to Greece's national sovereignty. This policy of Turkey is only one part of Turkey's grand revisionist tactics, which challenges the Lausanne Treaty in its entirety and aims to completely change the status quo of the region.

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<sup>3</sup> Issues of Greek-Turkish Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic, <https://www.mfa.gr/zitimata-ellinotourkikon-sheseon/>

## **Turkey, from the balancer between West and East, to a sophisticated agitator**

The aggressive nature of Turkish foreign policy is neither a surprise nor a new development. Having its roots in the Ottoman Empire, it is inherent in the very existence of the Turkish state and the structural aggressiveness of Turkish politics in general. The Turkish Republic, to paraphrase Kondylis, from the very beginning of its creation, has never ceased to look beyond its borders, to places where its hegemonic memories lead it<sup>4</sup>. This tendency became clear after the fall of the USSR, when Turkey gradually began its attempt to fill the power vacuum left in its wider region by the Soviet Union. Even more so after Erdoğan took power, following a brief (but exuberant) re-establishment of the country as a serious and reliable partner of the European Union, which could act as a balancing actor between the Muslim world, especially those of the extremist parts of Islam, and the entity of the West, realising that its benefits from a close alliance with a regional power like the EU are rather limited, Turkey has attempted to upgrade its role from that of an Eastern Mediterranean placeholder to that of a dominant regional power in the region. Following a particularly marginal domestic and foreign policy, Erdoğan's Turkey has shown that it has accepted as unrealistic the possibility of a coordinated European course and integration (if we accept that from the very beginning it really wanted such an eventuality), since once it became clear that the political survival of himself and his party is existentially linked to the institutions of the state, a move away from European institutional requirements was a one-way street. Since then, Turkey has been straddling dangerously between West and East, trying to exploit everything on the way to its hegemonic 'rehabilitation'.

After the failed coup in 2016 and the activation of the state of emergency doctrine, and in combination with the new power and security vacuum left by the gradual retreat of the United States from Europe and the Middle East, President Erdoğan is trying to upgrade Turkey's geopolitical role, taking advantage of the triangle of instability formed by the Balkans, Transcaucasia and the Middle East. Inspired by a neo-Ottomanism, a hybrid of pan-Turkism and Kemalism, Erdoğan aspires to make his country the leading power in the region. Applying Davutoğlu's doctrine of strategic depth and multiple regional identities, Turkey is pursuing an aggressive and expansive foreign policy, on a symbolic and practical level from the Balkans to the Middle East. With a view to maximizing its political advantage, either in the short or long term, Turkey is forging strategic alliances with countries such as Albania, Bosnia, Libya, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and India, while maintaining a high-risk, ambivalent competitive balance with Russia. At the same time, Turkey never misses an opportunity to express dissatisfaction with the West, but never comes into direct conflict with it. In fact, this foreign policy of open fronts in different and disparate geographical locations to a degree of overstretch, show that Turkey, possessed by a hegemonic syndrome, is a rising regional and revisionist power, the international agitator of the region.

A key arm of Turkey's quest to become a dominant regional power is the maintenance of political tension with Greece. Its unwillingness to comply with international law and its incitement of growing tensions in the Aegean and Thrace demonstrate its aggressive policy towards Greece and, at the same time, make the security dilemma of Greek-Turkish relations more relevant than ever. Turkey's standard tactic in its relations with Greece and on the issue of dispute resolution is to argue that these issues are political, not legal, and require a comprehensive political negotiation. Through a maximalist assertive policy of assertiveness and a tactic of creating deadlock and consolidation on the ground, Turkey seeks to bring Greece into a comprehensive negotiation, knowing that if it sits down at the negotiating table with Greece, in the context of mutual concessions, it has much more to gain than the limited benefits that can be derived from a legal settlement.

## **Greece, from inertia to a new deterrent force**

For many years Greece has perceived the issues of its disputes with Turkey within a European perspective. The Helsinki Agreement meant for Greece an opportunity to normalize relations with the neighbouring state through a European course, a democratic and institutional upgrading of Turkey<sup>5</sup>. The disappointment of these expectations left Greece without a clear and coherent strategic plan towards Turkey since the mid-2000s.

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<sup>4</sup> Kondylis, (2004).

<sup>5</sup> Tsakonas, (2010).

In fact, the ten-year economic crisis that began in 2009 and the subsequent monopolistic preoccupation of foreign policy with efforts to rescue the country within the EMU, trapped Greek foreign policy within the assumption that the scope and means of action are only allowed to be what does not negatively affect the economic and European survival of the country. Greece's introversion at home and abroad and the challenges posed by the deep economic crisis to national sovereignty, trapped the foreign policy at a level of appeasement of the, then mainly mild, advancing Turkish behaviour. The postponement to the future of critical decisions on Greece's foreign policy was driven by an unwillingness of Greek governments to speak rationally about the country's long-standing burning issues with Turkey and an indifference to the unpleasant truths that needed to be told. The lack of a strategic plan has meant that, for years, Greek governments have been unable to conceive an effective strategy for resolving the disputes, resulting in them being limited from time to time to a hypocritical patriotic rhetoric of zero political cost and zero political effect at the national level. The field of public discourse was not a privileged field of analysis and promotion of pragmatic national interests, but a field of atavistic complacency and narcissistic indifference to the new facts that were being created in the region. Public discourse at the top level, instead of trying to influence and shape public opinion with realistic reasoning, followed it by adhering to a counterproductive and inexpensive populism. The continuous rationalization, from the Greek side, of Turkey's provocative behaviour, either as an attempt to extract and defuse an internal political crisis or as a strategy aimed at the economic (and supposedly fair) co-exploitation of the Aegean, concealed the real motives of the revisionist Turkish policy, i.e. its identity and ideological motives.

In this way, Greece has for many years chosen to micromanage its issues with Turkey and has been indifferent to substantial and definitive settlements. The policy of appeasement has slid to levels of retreat and to a certain extent, at least on low-political issues, has entrenched the partial Finlandization of Greece by Turkey.

To the security dilemma of relations with Turkey, Greece has followed and continues to respond with the doctrine of deterrence. In the opposite direction to Turkey's revisionist foreign policy, it accepts the status quo in its region, while acknowledging the threat that Turkey poses to its national security. For this reason, it has traditionally pursued a defence strategic doctrine based on deterrence through external and internal balancing. In terms of external balance, Greece has always been a truly reliable partner of major international organizations such as NATO and the EU and other regional alliances, maintaining a significant soft power at the regional level, compensating to some extent for the lack of primary deterrent power. Greece has been attempting to acquire a deterrent power in the last two years, with the necessary upgrade of its strategic doctrine through the renewal of its defence equipment, which significantly strengthens its internal deterrent strength.

Today, in this international system, more complex than ever, Greece is called upon to reflect critically, not only on its strategic doctrine but also on its place in the world. The challenges require a regrouping of forces and a national plan. The United States' hitherto unobtrusive stance in Europe and the wider region and the European Union's strategic embarrassment have shown Greece that its ability to be a deterrent to its own threats is critical. Furthermore, invoking international law to counter an aggressive disruptive force is not enough if it is not accompanied by the respective actions and the respective responsibility to accept any outcome. Therefore, the country's foreign and defence policy is defined by the following necessary pillars: the establishment of a unified, rational and realistic national strategic plan, which requires the broadest possible political and social consensus; an active diplomatic policy with a multi-level presence in the wider Mediterranean region through partnerships and strategic alliances; the upgrading of the country's political entity within the European Union; and the further strengthening of the deterrent force.

### **Conclusion – The world order after the crisis in Ukraine and the need for a paradigm shift**

Putin's Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine acted as an accelerator of important developments. The most important of these was the realignment of the United States' strategy on the European continent and the European Union's violent exit from years of strategic inertia. The return of the United States reaffirms the axis around which all international powers are called upon to position themselves. For Greece, a European and liberal democracy, the question has long been answered. For Turkey, the question is more inexorable than ever, as it confronts Turkey with the hard dilemmas arising from its geopolitical position and from the ambivalent foreign policy of the oscillations between West and East. The reconstruction of the West as a strategic entity is Turkey's last chance to pursue a rational policy at the international level.

The catalyst in the new period of Greek-Turkish relations is not only the restoration of the US to the role of regulator of the international system and the bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey, but also the attitude of Germany, which maintains historically stable, but also complex relations with Turkey, especially within the new European security system, as it will be formed in the next period. This historical and political juncture is an opportunity that Greece and Turkey cannot let pass unused. Decades of inertia and failures have shown that a continuous policy of appeasement and aggression can have dangerous results. More than ever before today, Greek-Turkish issues are linked to power relations at a much higher level than the bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey.

In this ever-changing world, the intensity of anarchy in the international system seems to be increasing and securing a balance is becoming increasingly difficult. The regression to a Hobbesian culture of anarchy acts as an obstacle to finding solutions for peaceful coexistence and exacerbates the imaginary differences between the states. Both countries are now called upon to seek new and more effective ways of settling their differences, which should be based on the construction of mutual trust and common identity. Shifting the paradigm of relations between Greece and Turkey is the alternative path that can bring mutually beneficial solutions. These complex dynamics can potentially be transformed, from a conflictual culture to a Kantian culture of eternal peace, rules and institutions that make collective security and prosperity more likely. The construction of common positive identities does not mean that states abandon their rational need for security and profit. The identities of both countries should acquire a new dynamic of cooperation and common interest, which create an opportunity for a just and definite settlement of their national issues in a new emancipatory way of understanding mutual security.

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