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**Greek - Turkish Relations since the February 2023 Earthquake:
Assessment and Prospects**

By

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Despite the notable improvement in Greek - Turkish relations since early 2023, the two countries are unlikely to reach a permanent resolution to their bilateral disputes in the Aegean, Eastern Mediterranean, and Cyprus. Neither Athens nor Ankara has so far demonstrated any willingness to compromise on long-held positions. Turkey's insistence on its "*Blue Homeland*" doctrine, intense domestic nationalist sentiment, and the perception of the global and regional balance of power shifting in its favor will likely discourage the Turkish government from making politically painful compromises to its rival and instead bid for time to establish its dominance in the region. On its part, Athens is also unlikely to concede to Turkish demands as they would have an adverse impact on its sovereignty. Relations will remain stable as long as the US and its allies prioritize NATO cohesion amid ongoing conflicts, although Ankara will likely make a renewed push to assert its territorial claims once it perceives an opening to do so.

The devastating February 2023 earthquakes in Turkey set off a renewed rapprochement between the two countries after years of diplomatic and military tension and mutually hostile rhetoric. Greece was quick to offer aid to its neighbor and soon afterward the two governments restored high-level contacts and other diplomatic communication channels that had been almost completely severed by 2022. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met in July and September 2023 in the margins of the NATO summit in Vilnius and the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, respectively. In December 2023 Erdogan visited Athens, where he and Mitsotakis signed several economic and cultural cooperation agreements. Most notably, the two leaders signed the "*Athens Declaration on Friendly Relations and Good-Neighbourliness*," in which they promised to avoid statements and actions that could worsen ties between the countries, as well as engage in political dialogue on bilateral disputes, economic and cultural cooperation (referred to as "*positive agenda*"), and military-to-military confidence building measures to quickly deescalate frictions. In May 2024 Mitsotakis and Erdogan met in Ankara and reaffirmed their mutual intention to build on the positive momentum to further advance Greek-Turkish relations. They followed up with another meeting in July during the NATO summit in Washington D.C., while the last one took place during the UN General Assembly in September.

Roughly a year and a half after the launch of “*earthquake diplomacy*,” what are the state and prospects of Greek - Turkish relations? Although the cessation of threatening statements, which had become an almost daily recurrence in the years and months before February 2023, and the resumption of high-level contacts and diplomatic channels for crisis management and avoidance are certainly positive developments, facts on the ground offer a more pessimistic outlook. Neither side has so far displayed any willingness to make any concessions in their long-held positions on bilateral disputes. Turkish officials have kept adhering to the “*Blue Homeland*” doctrine and the November 2019 maritime delimitation agreement with Libya, which claim large swathes of the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean as within Turkish maritime jurisdiction and encroach upon Greek and Greek Cypriot sovereignty in their near waters. The Turkish government also continues to demand the demilitarization of Greece’s eastern Aegean islands and dispute the sovereignty of several other islands and islets, as well as insist on characterizing the Muslim minority in Greece’s Thrace region as “*Turkish*,” claims that Greek leaders and diplomats reject outright. Furthermore, Erdogan remains entrenched in his call for a two-state solution in Cyprus and the international recognition of the Ankara-controlled “*Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)*,” undermining the UN framework that demands a bizonal bicomunal federation within a single state. On its part, Greece has underlined that the only dispute it recognizes and is willing to negotiate about is the delimitation of the continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) in the waters between the two countries. Regarding Cyprus, Athens rejects any prospective solution that deviates from the UN-approved framework.

Domestic trends in both countries, but particularly in Turkey, do not allow much room for optimism either. In April, Turkey’s Education Ministry decided to include the “*Blue Homeland*” doctrine in the national school curriculum. The government’s insistence on this doctrine, its widespread propagation in Turkish media, the continuous effort to strengthen Turkey’s naval forces through the expanding domestic defense industry, and now the plan to instill it in the minds of the younger generations, all indicate that this is not simply an initial maximalist position put forward to gain leverage in negotiations with Greece, only to be abandoned or curtailed in a later stage once Athens makes certain compromises. By characterizing Turkey’s maritime claims as part of the country’s “*homeland*” and equating it to its sovereign land territory, it is unlikely that Erdogan or any

other Turkish leader would be politically willing or able to concede any part of it. Rising nationalist and militaristic sentiments within Turkish society, cultivated by the government particularly since the failed 2016 coup attempt against Erdogan and bolstered by Turkey's military expansion in places like Syria, Iraq, Libya, and the Caucasus and the rise of its defense industry, will likely discourage the incumbent or future Turkish leaders from compromising on the "*Blue Homeland*" lest they be accused of abandoning vital national interests. Intense nationalism is currently omnipresent across the Turkish political spectrum and both the governing coalition and opposition parties back Ankara's claims in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean. When considering the centuries-old history of Greek - Turkish animosity and the impact of mutual nationalist violence on shaping each nation's modern identity, the psychological appeal of asserting Turkish power against Hellenism becomes all the more evident. Added to that is the strategic rationale behind the "*Blue Homeland*" doctrine, as described by Turkish political and security officials: gaining control over Aegean and East Mediterranean natural resources and breaking the geographical "*pincer*" created by the Greek islands and Cyprus around the Anatolian mainland, which would allow for unimpeded Turkish naval power projection from the Straits all the way to the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and Indian Ocean and influence over critical Asia-Africa-Europe maritime routes.

Considering the above, further progress in Greek - Turkish relations is unlikely under Erdogan. The Turkish president's AK Party suffered a historic defeat in local elections last March and will likely be unwilling to make meaningful compromises on the politically sensitive issue of the "*Blue Homeland*." Its continued promotion of the "*Blue Homeland*" as previously described, as well as recent decisions to upgrade military infrastructure and forces along the Aegean and East Mediterranean coast as well as in the "*TRNC*" in addition to the construction of new naval vessels, point toward an uncompromising stance on asserting Turkish maritime claims. In Greece, the popularity of the governing conservative New Democracy party and Prime Minister Mitsotakis himself are also at record lows according to recent polls. There's a consensus in Greek politics that conceding to Turkish demands would severely compromise Greece's interests in its near maritime region and even jeopardize Greek sovereignty upon the Aegean islands and the Republic of Cyprus in the long-term, resulting in the gradual "*Finlandization*" of Greece and its degrading into a Turkish satellite state, or even territorial losses in a worst-case

scenario. Thus, Mitsotakis too will likely be loath to make any significant compromise in Greek - Turkish issues, especially since he is already being attacked by nationalist forces within his own party as too accommodating toward Ankara. But a permanent resolution of Greek - Turkish disputes will likely be hard to achieve even if Erdogan steps down at the end of his presidential term in 2028. A Turkey Trends survey in 2022 showed that 61.5% percent of respondents aged 18 - 24 exhibit a “*high level of nationalism.*” A new generation that grew up in a highly nationalist and militaristic political environment and instilled from a young age with a sense of rising Turkish power, part of which is the “*Blue Homeland*” doctrine, will likely be keen on asserting Turkey’s regional dominance against a historic rival, regardless of whether Erdogan is succeeded by someone from within the current political establishment or the opposition finally comes into power.

In pushing their claims, Turkish leaders are likely encouraged by broader regional and global trends they see as favoring Turkey in the medium to long-term. Not only has Turkey managed to significantly advance its defense industry and independent power projection capabilities despite periodic financial difficulties, but ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have inflated its geopolitical significance. Its critical location on major East - West trade routes and between the Black and Mediterranean seas, large military and defense industrial base, influence in the Caucasus, Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, and other regions and flashpoints critical to great power competition between the US and its allies, Russia, China, and Iran, and ability to mediate between the rival blocs make it a significant even if difficult partner for Washington and European states, as recently described in an interview by outgoing US ambassador to Ankara Jeff Flake. In contrast, Greece is in a precarious financial and demographic situation, with high debt, ailing growth, and falling birth rates likely to considerably constrain its military strength in the future. There have also been indications of strain in Athens’ ties with the US, its most important ally. Not only was Washington reportedly absent and disinterested in intervening during the brief escalation in the Kasos - Karpathos area, but a military aid package offered by the Biden administration last January was rejected by Greek officials due to the decrepit state of the equipment, including warships and infantry fighting vehicles, revealing the low priority assigned by the US to Greece’s military needs. Furthermore, accusations have been made against the Greek shipping industry for allegedly aiding in the trade of Russian oil facilitated by Greek diplomatic lobbying, undermining the effectiveness of Western

sanctions against Moscow. According to press reports, the State Department has even threatened action against entities involved in these schemes. Overall, the conflicts in Europe and the Middle East seem to have strengthened the traditional US view of Turkey as a much more significant and valuable ally than Greece, despite previous hopes in Athens that this had been changing.

Longer term, there's a perception among the Turkish elite that the global order is shifting toward a more multipolar international system and Western dominance is gradually coming to an end. In this multipolar world, major regional powers like Turkey will have much greater freedom to exert influence and impose their will upon weaker neighbors. In a context of perceived Turkish economic and military rise and Greek decline, along with a sense that Western states will only become less capable of and willing to restrain Turkey's power, Ankara will likely see little reason to quickly resolve its disputes with Greece by making politically painful compromises. Turkish leaders will likely be inclined to bide their time and wait for the right moment to make a decisive move that will impose Turkey's preferred regional realities and maximalist demands upon Greeks and Greek Cypriots. This could be a form of "*Finlandization*" and de facto satellite status, in which Greece and the Republic of Cyprus concede aspects of their sovereignty, with their freedom of action in the Aegean and East Mediterranean depending on Turkish consent. In an extreme scenario, Ankara could even decide that outright military action and occupation of strategic locations in the Aegean and Cyprus would incur no significant costs and result in Turkish geopolitical dominance of the region. In any case, the perception of a rising Turkey and declining Greece within the broader context of long-term Western retrenchment will likely convince Turkish leaders that a window of opportunity will open at some point to turn "*Blue Homeland*" into reality and establish Turkey's status as the dominant regional actor, discouraging them from any significant compromises on their part.

To conclude, the author assesses that Turkish leaders have made a strategic long-term decision to establish regional dominance in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean. The "*Blue Homeland*" doctrine and its far-reaching maritime claims is the official encapsulation of this goal. In this doctrine, Greece's islands and Cyprus are viewed as geographical barriers restricting the projection of Turkish naval power between the Black and Mediterranean seas. The natural conclusion is that for Turkey to "*correct*" this

unfavorable situation, Greece and the Republic of Cyprus must either accept Ankara's claims and the partial loss of their sovereignty, or be forced to do so through diplomatic and military pressure. Rising domestic nationalist sentiments and the perception of regional and global trends gradually shifting the balance of power in Turkey's favor will likely discourage Erdogan and his successors from compromising on any aspect of the "*Blue Homeland*" and instead wait for the opportunity to assert Turkish dominance. Greece is also unlikely to make compromises of its own due to the severe impact accepting Turkish demands would have on its sovereignty and statehood. In that context, Greek - Turkish relations will likely remain tenuously stable as long as the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza motivate Western powers, and particularly the US, to maintain a foothold in the region and actively intervene to lower tensions and maintain NATO cohesion. But the two countries are unlikely to reach a resolution, and Ankara will likely start pushing its "*Blue Homeland*" claims once more if and when it perceives an opening to do so.



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