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SHORT COMMENTS

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in light of the December 7th, 2023 Athens Declaration between Greece
and Türkiye and the visit of the Turkish President to Egypt on
February 14th, 2024*

By Georgios Kouçakis, Research Associate of “HERMES” I.I.A.S.G.E.

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The future status of Greek bilateral relations with Türkiye and Egypt in light of the December 7th, 2023 Athens Declaration between Greece and Türkiye and the visit of the Turkish President to Egypt on February 14th, 2024

By Georgios Koukakis, Research Associate of “HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE.

The Greek - Turkish relations have been strained during the last five decades, due to the aggressive foreign policy implemented by Türkiye comprising inter alia a *casus belli* (threat of war) decision issued in 1995, the contest and violation of Greek sovereignty over several Aegean islands and the demand for their demilitarization, the constant violations of Greek national airspace and territorial sea, the instrumentalization of migration flows, several disputes regarding the delimitation of Greek maritime zones, the Greek responsibilities within the Athens FIR, and the jurisdiction of Greece within the defined Search and Rescue (S&R) area.

Türkiye’s aggressive foreign policy in the Aegean Sea and Eastern Mediterranean escalated in 2018 when it officially adopted the “*Mavi Vatan*” (Blue Homeland) doctrine, in the context of which Türkiye attempted to take advantage of the unstable political situation in *Libya*, proceeding to the illegal signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the temporary Government of National Accord (GNA) of Libya in 2019 which delimited their supposed maritime zones. In addition to that, Türkiye tried to conduct illegal seismic activities on Greek and Cypriot maritime zones in 2020, an action that was condemned by the European Union (EU) resulting in the suspension of its EU pre-accession funding.

In an effort to protect its sovereign rights, Greece filed a letter of complaint to the UN stating that the formentioned Turkish - Libyan MoU was void and null, also signing a bilateral agreement with Egypt in 2020 regarding the partial delimitation of their maritime zones according to the provisions of UNCLOS. Moreover, the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a series of maps in 2022 that proved the Turkish illegal claims. The same year, the bilateral relations between Greece and Türkiye were highly deteriorated to the point that the Turkish President stated that the Greek Prime Minister (PM) no longer existed for him – using the famous phrase “*Mitsotakis yok*” – because he considered that the Greek PM attempted to

influence the US decision on providing F-16 fighter jets to Turkey during the latter's speech at the Congress.

Due to the formentioned Turkish actions that were posing a direct threat to regional peace and security, many Mediterranean states established several collaborative schemes, such as the trilateral cooperation “*Greece – Cyprus – Israel*” and “*Greece – Cyprus – Egypt*”, the “*Strategic Partnership for Cooperation in Defense and Security*” of Greece and France, and the “*East Mediterranean Gas Forum*” (EMGF), in an attempt to protect their national interests. In this context, several projects have been planned such as the construction of the “*Euro-Asia Interconnector*” and the “*Euro-Africa Interconnector*” undersea electricity cables, the “*Eastern Mediterranean*” (*East-Med*) undersea natural gas pipe-line, and the “*India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor*” (IMEC).

In early 2023, the humanitarian aid provided by Greece after the disastrous earthquakes that struck Türkiye resulted in the revitalization of the Greek - Turkish relations. In this context, the 4th Positive Agenda Meeting was held in Ankara on March 22nd, 2023 and a meeting between the Greek PM, Kyriakos Mitsotakis and the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan took place in the sidelines of NATO Summit in Vilnius on June 12th, 2023. Finally, on December 7th, 2023 – after several high-level meetings – the Turkish President and the Greek PM signed the “*Athens Declaration on Friendly Relations and Good-Neighbourliness*,” a document considered as a milestone in the bilateral relations of the two neighboring states, as it provides for:

- ✓ The engagement of the two parties in continuing consultations based on political dialogue, positive agenda and confidence building measures,
- ✓ The refrainment from any statement or action than could undermine or discredit the letter and spirit of the Declaration or endanger the maintenance of peace and stability in the region,
- ✓ The resolution of any dispute through direct consultations or other means of mutual choice as provided for in the UN Charter.

On January 27th, 2024 though – shortly after the US President (Joe Biden) urged the Congress to approve the provision of F-16 fighter jets to Türkiye – the Turkish President made

a public offensive statement regarding Greece, during a meeting of the Turkish AKP political party, noting that:

*“Our struggle did not end with expelling the enemy [Greeks]
from our lands and throwing them into the sea from Izmir.”*

Despite the fact that the Athens Declaration provided that both Greece and Türkiye would refrain from any statement or action that could undermine or discredit their friendly relations and good-neighborliness or endanger the maintenance of peace and stability in the region, the Turkish President’s formentioned statement is of no surprise for many analysts, first of all because the habit of publicly offending and threatening Greece is a well-known behavior of him that aims to attract the political support of ethnicist groups and de-orientate Turkish citizens from severe domestic issues (e.g. the deteriorating economic situation of Türkiye), and secondly because “*Athens Declaration*” – as stated in its last part – does not constitute a binding international agreement, meaning that both parts can act against its provisions without facing any legal consequences.

Nevertheless, this kind of actions are not to be taken lightly, as they indicate that the Turkish President’s recent moves were merely a temporary change of behavior with the intent to promote a positive image of his country and not a mature choice that shows a permanent change of mindset towards the de-escalation of tension in the region and the promotion of peace and security through cooperation with other states. Moreover, the fact that the casus belli decision of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye is still active, in addition to the Turkish President’s continuing public statements (mainly) in 2022 threatening that “*Türkiye would suddenly come one night to Greece*” rise major concerns about Türkiye’s real objectives in relation to Greece’s national security.

In addition to the formentioned actions, Türkiye attempted to improve its bilateral relations with Egypt too, as they had been extremely poor since 2013 when the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood lost its political power. To this end the Turkish President visited (upon his initiative) Egypt on February 14th, 2024 – being his first visit after more than a decade – in order to meet his Egyptian counterpart, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The two leaders signed several agreements, confirmed the thawing of their relations and discussed several issues, on top of

which were the increase of trade between the two states and the on-going war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas, as Türkiye is well known for its support to the latter and Egypt is a favorable destination for Palestinian refugees.

The Erdogan – Sisi meeting raised concerns to the Greek side, because – despite the fact that neither Türkiye, nor Egypt made an official announcement – several Greek and Turkish media reported that the Turkish - Egyptian rapprochement might lead to the signing of an EEZ delimitation agreement between the two states, a scenario that was unsuccessfully promoted by the Turkish side in the past. In any case, it must be stressed that Egypt is one of the major trade partners of Türkiye and one of the most important energy providers in Eastern Mediterranean, serving as an energy hub in the region. That said, its rapprochement with Türkiye – although it is considered as a reasonable action that will boost its economy – might endanger the Greek - Egyptian relations in case that affects any of the planned energy projects in the Eastern Mediterranean.

To conclude, Türkiye’s attempt to normalize its bilateral relations with Greece and Egypt should be seen as a temporary “*strategic communications act*” that aims to promote its national interests by presenting a favorable profile and not as a permanent shift in its foreign policy that stems from the realization that the respect of international law and cooperation with other actors is the foundation of peace and security in the region. As far as the Greek - Turkish relations are concerned, the cautiousness and mistrust of Greece towards Türkiye is an understandable and justified perception which is reflected in the following statement made by the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, George Gerapetritis, according to which:

“[...] we would truly be living in the clouds to believe that the path to any normalization of Greek - Turkish relations would be linear, without downturns, without setbacks. We are aware of this. [...] There is a historic opportunity today. [...] To explore possibilities for us to live with Türkiye in a state of good neighborliness. If I do not act, and if the current government does not act to this end, we will be accountable to history. I'm not saying [...] that this effort will necessarily succeed. But I want to exhaust all avenues. [...]”





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