

European issues
n°645
1st November 2022

Greco-Turkish relations at their lowest ebb

ALEXIA KEFALAS

What really happened on 6th October in Prague? This question has been on the minds of European analysts since the dinner held in the Czech capital on the side-lines of the first summit meeting of the [European Political Community](#). Versions vary between the international press and the 44 heads of state and government.

After some wavering, they all seem to agree on the fact that after an altercation between Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the Greek Prime Minister, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish President, the latter left the room in a hurry.

According to the New York Times, the Turkish president "curtly cut off the Greek Prime Minister, who was talking about violations of maritime and air space in the Aegean Sea". According to the American daily, Erdogan "created unease", but the Greek government does not agree with this version.

In an interview with the French magazine *Le Point*, Kyriakos Mitsotakis states that, on the contrary, it was "Turkish President Erdogan who first spoke out, pointing its finger at Greece, accusing it of being responsible for instability in the Mediterranean". He continues: "I had previously informed Charles Michel, President of the European Council, that if such unfounded accusations were made, I would exercise my right of reply. This is what happened. I had the opportunity to make it clear who is behind the current tensions - and at the same time to invite Mr Erdogan to engage in serious dialogue based on international law, as all responsible leaders do."

After which the Turkish President did indeed leave. According to some European sources, he was "supposed to leave earlier anyway", although other sources also saw the Greek Prime Minister doing the same, but no version has been confirmed.

If this incident is still worrying some experts, as well as the Greek political class, it is because it mirrors long months of escalation, which are increasingly of concern to the authorities. The Greek Prime Minister believes that this is an important milestone in the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean^[1]. "My colleagues were able to see who the real aggressor was. Now it is clear to everyone. A political community is based on common values and principles. France, which initiated the Prague Summit, was right to invite Turkey. But it is now up to Turkey to decide whether it really wants to join," he said.

While Kyriakos Mitsotakis aims to be reassuring, his entourage is not so confident. The threats made by Turkey towards Greece are not new. Ankara is clearly questioning the delimitation of maritime borders, the continental shelf, and the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), but they have taken on another dimension since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. "Statements on the part of Turkish leaders regarding the dream of a blue homeland, a great Turkey, are inevitably worrying when they are made in the current context. Ankara wants the war in Ukraine to set a precedent and is becoming more aggressive in its rhetoric. Especially as Turkey continues to expand dynamically in Africa and the Balkans and wants to become an unavoidable player in the Middle East," observes Constantin Filis, director of the Institute of International Relations.

[1] On this subject, read the article by Admiral Jean Casabianca "Mediterranean; paradigm of contemporary conflict" in "Schuman Report on Europe, the State of the Union 2020", editions Lignes de repères, Paris, May 2020

After declaring that he was breaking off all dialogue with the Greek government, which "*is not at his level*", Erdogan announced, the day after the Prague dinner, on 7th October, on the fringe of a press conference, that his country "*could suddenly come one night*"[2]. A few days later, Ibrahim Kalin, spokesman for the Turkish Presidency, called on Greece to disarm its islands "*so as not to suffer the consequences*".

The international community and the Greek political class, both in power and in opposition, such as former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, (SYRIZA, radical left) called "*for an end to tensions and a rapid return to dialogue between the two countries*". But Turkey is not responding.

This martial position, maintained deliberately by Ankara, concerns above all the attack on the Dodecanese islands opposite the Turkish coast.

The Greek have in mind the small islet of [Imia](#), in the Dodecanese, which became a grey zone in 1996, to prevent a flare-up when Turks planted their flag there and Greeks were preparing to de-fend their territory. "*It is still a wound for all the Greeks, because a grey area means that this is-land belongs to no one. This is a sad state of affairs and inevitably Greek leaders are forced to take any territorial threat seriously, violating the basic principles of international law,*" adds Sotiris Dallis, professor of international relations at the University of Aegean. However, this ex-pert is not as worried as others about the Turkish rhetoric. He believes that two NATO members cannot come to blows, but says that Turkish aggressiveness is also due to the approaching elec-tions in June 2023.

Meanwhile, Turkish planes, drones and ships violate Greek air and sea space dozens of times a day. At the UN General Assembly last September, the Greek Prime Minister pleaded the Greek position, while refusing to participate in counterproductive verbal escalation.

Kyriakos Mitsotakis continues to mobilise his international counterparts, like French President Emmanuel Macron and US President Joe Biden, who are active supporters of Greece.

A [strategic partnership](#) was also signed with [France](#) in 2021, providing for mutual assistance in the event of danger. But nothing seems to be stopping Turkey's hegemonic appetite. The Greek islands interest Turkey for many reasons.

For instance, on 27 November 2019, the Turkish president, together with the Libyan government of Fayed al-Sarraj, drew the outline of an exclusive economic zone (EEZ), in preparation for offshore oil and gas exploitation, including the continental shelf of Greek islands, including Crete and Kastellórizo. An "*illegal manoeuvre*" denounced by the Greek government and not recognised by the international community.

Nevertheless, on 3 October in Tripoli, an operational memorandum was signed between Turkish ministers and the Libyan interim government of Abdel Hamid Dbeibah with a view to start the search for hydrocarbons in this area. If Turkish ships, on behalf of the Libyan government, sail into Greek maritime space, this will clearly be a *casus belli* for the Greek government.

This is why Greece is not afraid of showing its teeth by reinforcing its artillery. After [acquiring twenty-four Rafale fighter jets](#) and three [FDI frigates](#) from France, as well as F-35s from the United States, Lynx KF-41 armoured tanks from Germany and drones, the country intends to buy cor-vettes soon. These future contracts are attracting the attention of arms-producing countries. On a visit to Athens on 27 October, for the first time German Chancellor Olaf Scholz made clear his support for Greece over Turkey, to whom however Berlin has sold several submarines. "*It is not possible for NATO partners to question the sovereignty of another (member),*" the German Chancellor said in an interview with the Greek daily Ta Nea, before adding that "*all questions must be answered on the basis of international law*". After a long tête-à-tête with Kyriakos Mitsotakis, during which Olaf Scholz discussed the forthcoming acquisition of Lynx KF-41 armoured tanks by Greece, he stated at a press conference that it was "*unacceptable that Turkey should challenge the sovereignty of Greece, and therefore of a European country*". These statements hit hard in the Turkish media, yet they show a clear stance in a difficult

[2] In reference to the invasion of the northern part of the island of Cyprus in July 1974 by the Turkish army, following a failed coup d'état to join Greece. Since then, the northern part of Cyprus is still occupied by 30,000 Turkish soldiers.

situation. Olaf Scholz, who believes that *"the energy crisis can only be solved in a spirit of solidarity"*, has thus secured an ally in the European Council on this thorny issue, but could also soon land new arms contracts with Athens.

The threshold of 2% of its GDP set for armaments is far exceeded but, for the Greek Prime Minister, this is part of "logic of defence".

In July 2020 when Ankara sent a ship into the Aegean in search of hydrocarbons, with the assistance of four warships, [response](#) was heated against Turkish violations of international law. Of particular note was the serious incident between Turkey and France on 10 June, when a Turkish frigate fired on a French warship, an unprecedented occurrence between NATO partners.

At the time, Greece had conducted an inventory of its war material, both maritime and airborne. It was then realised it was time to renew its equipment. During the ten years of crisis and austerity that weighed on the Greek economy, it was impossible to modernise its armaments. Now that the economic situation seems to be much better, and faced with this threat, the government wants to catch up. Moreover, it is intransigent regarding its suppliers.

For example, the rapprochement between Turkey and Israel undoubtedly explains the cancellation of the visit of the Israeli Minister of Defence to Athens twice in six months. At the same time, the Greek authorities say they are open to following the example set by Israel and Lebanon, two neighbouring countries at war that have agreed to jointly explore for offshore hydrocarbons. *"Co-operating with neighbours is always the ideal option. This is exactly what we have done with our neighbours to the south and west, Egypt and Italy respectively, with whom we have delimited our maritime borders in good faith. But it is not by questioning Greece's sovereign rights beforehand that we will be able to reach a solution,"* clarified the Greek Prime Minister.

Another stumbling block has been added to this geopolitical, geostrategic, political and energy escalation: immigration.

The Greek government believes that Turkey is using the thousands of exiles and refugees it shelters on its territory *"as a weapon against Europe"*. It refers to March 2020, when dozens of refugees tried to cross the land border along the Evros river -in the north of the country- in their quest to reach Europe. Greece, backed by Frontex, stood in the way and was hailed as *"the shield of Europe"* by the EU leaders who came to the country. Except that this means pushing back migrants.

Many NGOs accuse Greece of *"push back"*, the illegal practice of turning back refugees. To this, Kyriakos Mitsotakis replies that: *"as Prime Minister of a European country on the front line, I have a duty to protect our borders and prevent migrants from entering Europe illegally - while obviously respecting humanitarian principles"*. Moreover, given the proximity of the Greek islands to the Turkish coast, it is unlikely that one can distinguish between *"refoulements"* and ban on departure. This controversy, instrumentalized by northern European NGOs, seriously undermines European identity, which is constantly trying to secure its borders, and is contrary to European decisions, which have even included plans to arm Frontex border guards.

The Greek Prime Minister deplores the Turkish practices towards exiles, and in particular the shocking image of 92 naked refugees abandoned near the river Evros. *"This is the negation of humanity,"* Constantinos Filis continues, *"when we see Turkey's response, we understand that the bellicose tone will continue and intensify. Especially since the Turkish ministers accuse Greece of being behind the staging of these photos. Turkey intends to use migrants in its campaign to castigate Greece, but also to send the message that the country has reached saturation point for refugees due to the looming economic crisis."*

In March 2016, an [agreement](#) was signed between Ankara and the European Union, in return for the

Greco-Turkish relations at their lowest ebb

reception of refugees in exchange for some €6 billion in subsidies. In recent months, this agreement has no longer been respected, which adds to the tensions between the two countries, which are hereditary enemies. The European Union should be firmer, as the citizens of the Union would want it. This would help to ease tensions that will only be fed by weakness and indecision.

Alexia KEFALAS,
journalist

You can read all of our publications on our site :
www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing Director : Pascale JOANNIN

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France , Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.