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The Greek-Turkish Bilateral Relations Revised: Towards an Era of ‘Conflictual Cooperation’?¹

Georgios Koukakis²

Abstract

The contemporary bilateral relations of Greece and Türkiye have been mostly characterised by tension, as they have led in several occasions to major diplomatic incidents and military crises. In 2017 a rapprochement in the form of regular high-level political meetings was initiated, only to be terminated in mid-2022 when the Turkish President stated that the Greek Prime Minister no longer existed for him terminating the established political dialogue, due to the latter’s address to the Joint Session of the US Congress. The support though that Greece provided to Türkiye in early-2023, after the devastating earthquake that stroke the latter, significantly improved the relations of the two sides leading in late-2023 to the signature of the ‘Athens Declaration’ and an several accords regarding their cooperation in various policy fields, acknowledging though the fact that their main issues of dispute remain active. The purpose of this article is to highlight the new dynamics of the Greek-Turkish relations in the context of their ongoing dispute.

Keywords: Greece, Türkiye, Foreign Policy, European Union, Athens Declaration, Crisis, Aegean Sea, Dispute, Conflict, Dispute.

Introduction

The tension in the bilateral relations between Greece and Türkiye dates back to 1453, the year when the Byzantine Empire fell to Ottoman Turks (MacGillivray & Teall, 2024). In 1821 the ‘*Greek Revolution*’ led to the creation of the modern state of Greece, while a few decades later the two sides were engaged in the ‘*Greco-Turkish Wars*’ of 1897 and 1921-22. On July 24, 1923 the ‘*Treaty of Lausanne*’ gave birth to the state of Türkiye (Britannica, 2016), initiating a new era in their bilateral relations which –excluding the ‘*Turkish Pogrom*’ in 1955 (Kourvetaris, 2006) and the expulsion of Greeks from Istanbul in 1964 (Kaliber, 2019)– can be characterized as moderate. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 though, severely deteriorated the Greek-Turkish relations resulting in several major diplomatic incidents and military crises, a situation that lasted until 2017 when the two sides began to conduct regular high-level political meetings. This rapprochement was paused in mid-2022 (first phase) and was initiated again in early-2023 (second phase).

The purpose of this article is to highlight the new dynamics of the Greek-Turkish relations in the

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context of their ongoing dispute. Its importance lies on the fact that the bilateral relations of Greece and Türkiye affect regional security and stability, and that it provides current information in a systematic way, contributing to the existing literature regarding the Greek-Turkish relations. The main conclusion is that the bilateral relations of the two states are fragile and must be perceived as a ‘*conflictual cooperation*’ which could easily collapse for various reasons. First, the article refers to the main reasons of dispute between Greece and Türkiye in order to explain the context in which the cooperation is established, after that it presents the key events of the *first phase* of the rapprochement, it proceeds to the examination of the *second phase* and concludes by assessing the prospects of their bilateral relations.

The reasons of the Greek-Turkish dispute

According to the official website of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Greece (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.a) and Türkiye (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.b), the Greek-Turkish dispute concerns the following issues:

- ✓ The breadth of Greece’s *national airspace*,
- ✓ The breadth and delimitation of Greece’s *maritime zones*,
- ✓ The delimitation of their *maritime boundaries*,
- ✓ The responsibilities of Greece’s within the *Athinai Flight Information Region (FIR)*,
- ✓ The *sovereignty* of several *Greek islands* of the Aegean Sea,
- ✓ The jurisdiction of Greece within its designated *Search and Rescue (S&R) region*,
- ✓ The *demilitarization* of several *Greek islands* of the Eastern Aegean Sea,

Moreover, Greece accuses Türkiye of posing a *threat of war* (casus belli) against Greece through the June 8, 1995 declaration of its National Assembly (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024b), and of violating the Greek *national airspace* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024a) and *territorial waters* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024c). On the other hand, Türkiye claims that the *Muslim minority* living in Greece is mistreated by the Greek authorities, that several of the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provisions don’t apply in Mediterranean Sea*, and that the *1995 declaration* has been used by the Greek side to discredit Türkiye (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.c).

The first phase (2017-2022) of the Greek-Turkish rapprochement: Too good to be true

Despite the fact that Greece and Türkiye had established a High-Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) on May 14, 2010 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024d) in order to resolve their dispute through

political consultations holding 4 sessions until 2016 (**Table 1**), it was only until 2017 that the two sides began their regular official meetings (**Table 2**).

Table 1. Key events regarding the High Level Cooperation Council (HLCC)

Date/Time Period	Key Event	Location
May 14, 2010	Establishment of HLCC	Athens (Greece)
March 4, 2013	2 nd session of the HLCC	Istanbul (Turkiye)
December 5-6, 2014	3 rd session of the HLCC	Athens (Greece)
March 8, 2016	4 th session of the HLCC	Izmir (Greece)
December 7, 2023	5 th session of the HLCC	Athens (Greece)

Source: Edited by Georgios Koukakis

The *first phase* (2017-2022) of the rapprochement was initiated on December 7-8, 2017 by the visit of the Turkish President in Athens (Prime Minister, 2017), marking the first visit of a Turkish President in Greece since 1952 (Turkish Embassy in Athens, 2019). On February 5-6, 2019 the Greek PM visited Istanbul and Ankara (Turkiye) where he met the Turkish President (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.c) and on April 15, 2021 –after the 62nd round of exploratory talks conducted on March 16-17, 2021 between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Greece and Turkiye – the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) visited his Turkish counterpart in Ankara where they established the ‘*Positive Agenda*’, a roadmap aiming to facilitate dialogue between the two states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024d). In the context of the ‘Positive Agenda’ there were held three meetings one behalf of the Deputies MoFA on May 29, 2021, June 16, 2021 and February 21, 2022, one meeting of the MoFA on May 31, 2021 and two meetings (**Table 2**) of the Greek PM and the Turkish President on June 14, 2021 and March 13, 2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024d).

Unfortunately, the Greek-Turkish relations deteriorated severely after the address of the Greek PM before the Joint Session of the US Congress on May 17, 2022 in Washington DC (USA), during which he stressed the ongoing occupation of the Northern part of Cyprus, characterising it as an ‘*open act of aggression*’ of Turkiye that defines international law, highlighted that the same approach is endorsed by Turkiye as far as the Greek-Turkish dispute is concerned referring to the violation of Greece’s sovereignty and its territorial rights in addition to the Turkish overflights over Greek islands,

and implied that Türkiye is a source of instability on NATO's Southeastern flank, urging the US officials to think twice during the defense procurement decision-making procedure regarding the Eastern Mediterranean region (Prime Minister, 2022).

Table 2. Key events regarding the first phase (2017-2022) of the Greek-Turkish rapprochement

Date/Time Period	Key Event	Location	Remarks
December 7-8, 2017	Meeting of the Greek PM & the Turkish President	Athens (Greece)	65 years since the last visit
February 5-6, 2019	Meeting of the Greek PM & the Turkish President	Istanbul & Ankara (Türkiye)	-
March 16 - 17, 2021	Political consultations of Greece & Türkiye (Ministries of Foreign Affairs)	Athens (Greece)	62 nd round of exploratory talks
April 15, 2021	Establishment of Positive Agenda	Ankara (Türkiye)	Visit of the Greek MoFA
May 29, 2021	Meeting of the Deputy MoFA of Greece & Türkiye	Kavala (Greece)	-
May 31, 2021	Meeting of the Turkish MoFA of Greece & Türkiye	Athens (Greece)	-
June 14, 2021	Meeting of the Greek PM & the Turkish President	Brussels (Belgium)	NATO Summit
June 16, 2021	Meeting of the Deputy MoFA of Greece & Türkiye	Antalya (Türkiye)	-
February 21, 2022	Meeting of the Deputy MoFA of Greece & Türkiye	Athens (Greece)	-
March 13, 2022	Meeting of the Greek PM & the Turkish President	Istanbul (Türkiye)	-
Note: The cells in bold letters indicate events participated by the Heads of State & Government			

Source: Edited by Georgios Koukakis

As a result, on May 22, 2022 the Turkish President stated –using the Turkish phrase “*Mitsotakis yok*”– that the Greek PM no longer existed for him and that he will never meet him again, expressing the opinion that he tried to prevent the US officials from selling F-16 fighter jets to Türkiye, despite the agreement the two leaders had made not to include third countries in the Greek-Turkish dispute (Newsroom, 2022). Moreover, on June 9, 2022 the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs published 16 maps depicting the illegal unilateral actions and claims of Türkiye, stating that the aforementioned action was made “*in an effort to increase the wider public's awareness of Turkish revisionism*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

In response, on September 20, 2022 the Turkish President accused the Greek Coast Guard of sinking immigrant boats, stating during his address before the UN General Assembly that “*Greece is turning*

the Aegean Sea into a graveyard for refugees” (General Assembly, 2022) and on October 6, 2022 during the Greek PM’s speech in *European Political Community* summit that was held in Prague (Slovakia), the Turkish President interrupted him while he was referring to the Turkish maritime and air space violations in the Aegean Sea in order to express his opposition, resulting in the premature departure of the Turkish President (Kefalas, 2022). The described tension in Greek-Turkish relations remained the same until early-2023, when an unfortunate event brought the two parts closer, initiating the second phase of rapprochement.

The second phase (2023-2024) of rapprochement: Towards an era of ‘conflictual cooperation’

The *second phase* (2023-2024) of the Greek-Turkish rapprochement (**Table 3**) seems to have been the result of the support that Greece provided to Türkiye on the occasion of the disastrous earthquake that stroke the latter on February 6, 2023 (Moschovidis, 2023). Greece’s support –also referred to as ‘*Earthquake Diplomacy*’ (Kaki, 2023)– was followed by a visit of the Greek MoFA to Antakya (Türkiye) on February 12, 2023 to actively express his support and compassion to the Turkish people, an action that was highly valued by his Turkish counterpart (Moschovidis, 2023) leading to an official meeting of the two officials in Ankara on March 22, 2023 restoring the bilateral relations of their states. On July 12, 2023 the Greek PM and the Turkish President met on the sidelines of the NATO summit, where they agreed to reactivate the Greek-Turkish political consultations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024d).

To this end, the Greek and Turkish MoFA held two more meetings on September 5, 2023 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024d) and on April 3, 2024 (Newsroom, 2024b), the Deputies MoFA held three meetings on October 16-17, 2023 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024d), on February 1-2, 2024 (Newsroom, 2024a) and on March 11, 2024 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024e), and personnel from the Ministries of Defence met on November 13, 2023 and on April 22, 2024 to discuss Confidence Building Measures (CBM) between the two sides (Ministry of National Defence, 2024).

As far as the leaders of Greece and Türkiye are concerned, they had another meeting on September 20, 2023 on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024d) that was followed on December 7, 2023 by an official visit of the Turkish President in Athens which is considered to be a landmark of the Greek-Turkish relations, as they signed a ‘*Declaration on Friendly Relations and Good-Neighbourliness*’ –widely known as the ‘*Athens Declaration*’– expressing their political will to resolve their dispute through dialogue and to refrain from actions that will increase tension (Prime Minister, 2023), in the context of which the two sides signed 15 accords (**Table 4**) covering several policy fields (Newsroom, 2023),.

Table 3. Key events regarding the second phase (2023-2024) of the Greek-Turkish rapprochement

Date/Time Period	Key Event	Location	Remarks
February 12, 2023	Visit of the MoFA of Greece	Antakya (Turkiye)	-
March 22, 2023	Meeting of the Deputy MoFA of Greece & Turkiye	Ankara (Turkiye)	-
July 12, 2023	Meeting of the Greek PM and the Turkish President	Vilnius (Lithuania)	NATO Summit
September 5, 2023	Meeting of the MoFA of Greece & Turkiye	Ankara (Turkiye)	-
September 20, 2023	Meeting of the Greek PM & the Turkish President	New York (USA)	UN General Assembly
October 16-17, 2023	Meeting of the Deputy MoFA of Greece & Turkiye	Athens (Greece)	-
November 13, 2023	Delegations meeting for CBM	Ankara (Turkiye)	Defence Ministries
December 7, 2023	5th High Level Cooperation Council	Athens (Greece)	Athens Declaration
February 1-2, 2024	Meeting of the Deputy MoFA of Greece & Turkiye	Istanbul (Turkiye)	-
March 11, 2024	Meeting of the Deputy MoFA of Greece & Turkiye	Ankara (Turkiye)	-
April 3, 2024	Meeting of the MoFA of Greece & Turkiye	Brussels (Belgium)	NATO meeting of MoFA
April 22, 2024	Delegations meeting for CBM	Athens (Greece)	Defence Ministries
May 13, 2024	Meeting of the Greek PM & the Turkish President	Ankara (Turkiye)	-
Note: The cells in bold letters indicate events participated by the Heads of State & Government			

Source: Edited by Georgios Koukakis

On May 13, 2024 the Turkish President was visited by the Greek PM in Ankara (Prime Minister, 2024), after which the latter announced the establishment of the ‘*Greek-Turkish Business Council*’, stressed that the two leaders decided to enhance their cooperation in the fields of trade and investments, referred the Greek initiative taken that allows Turkish citizens to visit ten Greek islands on a special visa policy, reiterated the need to intensify the cooperation of the two sides on migration issues, and stressed the equal opportunities provided to the Muslim Greek citizens of Thrace. He also stressed his dissatisfaction regarding the Turkish decision to convert the ‘Chora Church’ in Istanbul to a Muslim mosque, as well as the fact that Greece disagrees with Turkiye’s positions as far as the Cyprus issue and the War in Gaza are concerned.

Table 4. The 15 accords signed in the context of the ‘Athens Declaration’

Policy Field/Sector	Type of Accord	Contracting Part		Remarks
		Greece	Turkiye	
Education	Agreement	Ministry of Education	Ministry of Education	Vocational training
Energy	Memorandum of Understanding	AΔMHE	TEIAS	Electrical interconnection of Greece & Turkiye
Development	Memorandum of Understanding	Ministry of Development	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)
Exports	Memorandum of Understanding	Export Credit Greece	Turk Eximbank	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Investments	Memorandum of Understanding	Enterprise Greece	Invest in Turkiye	Investment attraction
Investments & Business	Memorandum of Understanding	Enterprise Greece	Union of Chambers & Commodity Exchanges of Turkiye (TOBB)	Support for business communities
Social Services	Memorandum of Understanding	Ministry of Social Cohesion & Family	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Equal access and inclusion of people with disabilities
Sports	Memorandum of Understanding	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Replaces 2013 Protocol
Tourism	Joint Declaration	Ministry of Tourism	Ministry of Culture & Tourism	Establishment of Common Tourism Committee
Research & Development	Joint Declaration	ΓΓΕΤ	TUBİTAK	Scientific Cooperation of Greece & Turkiye
Economy & Commerce	Joint Declaration	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Ministry of Commerce	Joint Economy & Commerce – Joint Energy, Trade & Transport Committee (JEC – JETCO)
Rural Development	Joint Declaration	Ministry of Rural Development & Food	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Enhancement of cooperation
Customs	Joint Declaration	Independent Authority for Public Revenue (IARP)	Ministry of Commerce	Enhancement of cooperation
Environment	Joint Statement/Declaration	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Environmental protection & everyday life in an urban environment
Transportation	Joint Declaration	ΕΓΝΑΤΙΑ	Turkey General Directorate of Highways	2 nd second cross-border bridge in the Kipi-Ipsala area (Evros)

Source: Edited by Georgios Koukakis

More important, the Greek PM highlighted the fact that the two sides –despite their different perspectives– agree on several issues, such as the establishment of a cease-fire in Gaza, the protection of the civilians and the release of the hostages, also noting that Greece –as long as Turkiye respects the European acquis– will support its EU accession path (Koukakis, 2023a) and wishes to intensify their consultations, stating that the next HLCC meeting will be held in Ankara in late-2024. Finally, the Turkish President thanked the Greek PM for Greece’s support in reaching a ceasefire in Gaza, but reiterated that he doesn’t consider Hamas as a terrorist group expressing his grief that Greece considers it as one. Responding to the Turkish President’s comment, the Greek PM concluded the joint statement saying that:

“Let us agree, Mr. President, that we disagree on this issue, but let us agree that we agree on the need at this moment to have an immediate ceasefire and above all, above all, to protect the Palestinian civilians, who are the innocent, the big victims of this war.”

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the presented facts, it is obvious that Greece and Türkiye have exhibited the political will to cooperate in several fields of ‘*low politics*’ and establish regular channels of communications, in order to promote political dialogue as a mean of resolving their dispute. Despite the fact though that the distinction between ‘low politics’ and ‘high politics’ can sometimes be blur (Olsen, 2017), it must be noted that due to the complexity, severity and long duration of their dispute, the Greek-Turkish relations are extremely fragile –a conclusion that is confirmed by their short-term severe deterioration in 2022– and the rapprochement of the two sides must be perceived as a new kind of ‘*conflictual cooperation*’ which could collapse in case of an action affecting any of their main issues of dispute, such as a future agreement on the delimitation of maritime zones between Türkiye and Egypt (Koukakis, 2024a).

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