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The Delimitation of Greece's Maritime Zones: Background, Recent Developments & Future Challenges in the Context of the Greek-Turkish Conflict¹

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Abstract

On 16 April 2025 Greece published its Maritime Spatial Planning which inter alia depicted the limits of all of its maritime zones creating tension in the Greek-Turkish relations, as the delimitation of the maritime zones in the Aegean is the main reason behind the Greek-Turkish conflict. The purpose of this article is to present the current status of the Greek maritime zones in the context of the ongoing Greek-Turkish conflict, and how this dispute affects the national security of Greece and regional security in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords: Greece, Turkey, maritime zone, UNCLOS, conflict, energy security, Eastern Mediterranean.

Introduction

Understanding the legal framework of the delimitation of maritime zones between coastal states is of great importance, as it is a matter related to several policy fields and one of the major causes of intrastate conflict. One of these cases is the delimitation of Greece's maritime zones, which is the main reason behind the Greek-Turkish conflict. The purpose of this article is to present the current status of the Greek maritime zones in the context of the ongoing Greek-Turkish conflict. Its importance stems from the fact that it deals with contemporary events that have not been thoroughly analysed yet and that it affects not only the national security of Greece but also the regional security of Eastern Mediterranean thus helps policy-makers understand the contemporary conditions of the security environment in order to improve their decision-making.

The Legal Framework of Maritime Zones Delimitation

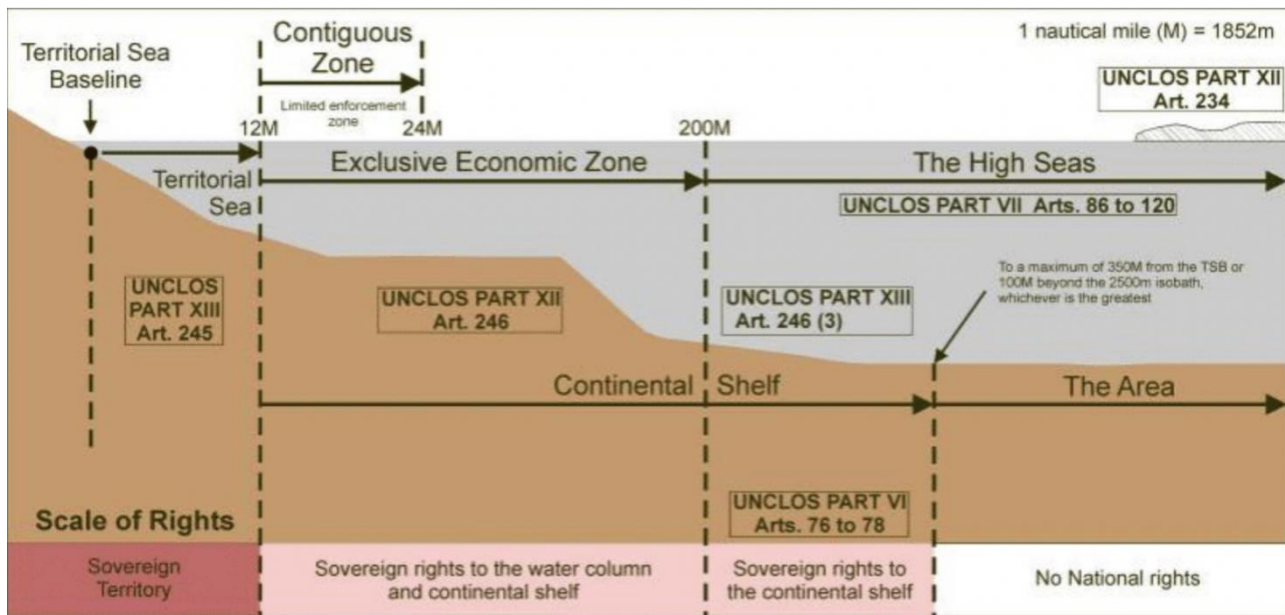
The *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS) which was adopted on 10 December 1982 and entered into force on 16 November 1994 (International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, n.d.) is the legal framework that inter alia governs all matters related to a state's maritime

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zones (Figure 1). The main reason why several states have been in conflict regarding the delimitation of their maritime zones –especially the ‘*Territorial Sea*’, the ‘*Exclusive Economic Zone*’ and the ‘*Continental Shelf*’– is that maritime zones are related to a state’s sovereignty and sovereign rights (Table 1), providing the state the ability to exploit underwater energy deposits that are located in them, thus enhancing its economic and energy security.

Figure 1. The provisions of UNCLOS regarding maritime zones



Source: Standing (2022)

According to *article 3* (United Nations, 1982:27) of the aforementioned UNCLOS, the breadth of a state’s *Territorial Sea* –measured from the baselines of the coastal state– must not exceed *12 nautical miles* (n.m.), while *article 2* (United Nations, 1982:27) defines that:

“1. The sovereignty of a coastal State extends, beyond its land territory and internal waters and, [...] to an adjacent belt of sea, described as the territorial sea. 2. This sovereignty extends to the air space over the territorial sea as well as to its bed and subsoil. [...]”.

Moreover, according to *article 57* (United Nations, 1982:44) of UNCLOS, the breadth of a state’s *Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)* –measured from the baselines of the coastal state– must not exceed *200 n.m.*, while *article 55* (United Nations, 1982:43) defines that:

“The exclusive economic zone is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, subject to the specific legal regime established in this Part, under which the rights and jurisdiction of the coastal State and the rights and

freedoms of other States are governed by the relevant provisions of this Convention”.

As far as the rights that coastal states have in their EEZ, *article 56* defines that a coastal state has *sovereign rights* in regard to the exploration and exploitation, conservation and management of the (living or non-living) natural resources of the waters which are superjacent to the seabed and of the seabed and its subsoil, while as far as other activities are concerned a coastal state has sovereign rights in regard to the economic exploitation (eg. producing energy) and exploration of the EEZ (United Nations, 1982:43). The same article defines that a coastal state has *jurisdiction* in its EEZ as far as establishing and using artificial islands, installations and structures, conducting marine scientific research, and protecting and preserving the marine environment are concerned (United Nations, 1982:43-44).

In regard to the rights of non-coastal states in the EEZ of a coastal state are concerned, *article 58* defines that non-coastal states enjoy the *freedom of navigation* and the *freedom of overflight*, and can inter alia lay *submarine cables and pipelines*, provided that they respect the coastal state’s laws and regulations that are related to the aforementioned EEZ rights (United Nations, 1982:43-44). To this end, UNCLOS also provides for the respect of the non-coastal states’ rights on behalf of coastal states, as *article 56* defines that:

“In exercising its rights and performing its duties under this Convention in the exclusive economic zone, the coastal State shall have due regard to the rights and duties of other States and shall act in a manner compatible with the provisions of this Convention” (United Nations, 1982:43-44).

According to *article 76* (United Nations, 1982:53-54) of UNCLOS, the breadth of a state’s *Continental Shelf* –measured from the baselines of the coastal state– must not exceed *350 n.m.*,³ defining that:

“The continental shelf of a coastal State comprises the seabed and subsoil of the submarine areas that extend beyond its territorial sea throughout the natural prolongation of its land territory to the outer edge of the continental margin, or to a distance of 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured where the outer edge of the continental margin does not extend up to that distance”.

³ The article provides some exemptions depending on the morphology of the seabed and the case of coastal states with opposite or adjacent coasts.

Table 1. The provisions of UNCLOS regarding Territorial Sea, EEZ & Continental Shelf

Maritime Zone	Territorial Sea	EEZ	Continental Shelf
Breadth (max)	12 nm	200 nm	350 nm*
Content	Water column Seabed & Subsoil All natural resources	Water column Seabed & Subsoil All natural resources	Seabed & Subsoil Seabed & Subsoil natural resources
Related Provisions	Articles 2-32, 48, 245	Articles 36, 48, 55-75, 246	Articles 48, 76-85, 246
Airspace above	Coastal State Sovereignty	---	---
Water column	Coastal State Sovereignty	Coastal State Sovereign Rights & Jurisdiction	---
Seabed & Subsoil	Coastal State Sovereignty	Coastal State Sovereign Rights & Jurisdiction	Coastal State Exclusive Sovereign Rights
Natural resources	Coastal State Sovereignty	Coastal State Sovereign Rights & Jurisdiction	Coastal State Exclusive Sovereign Rights
Activities allowed to all states	---	Freedom of navigation Freedom of overflight Laying submarine cables Laying submarine pipelines	Laying submarine cables** Laying submarine pipelines**
<p>* Exemptions apply depending on the morphology of the seabed and the case of coastal states with opposite or adjacent coasts.</p> <p>** The coastal state must give consent for the delineation of their course and can take reasonable measures to protect its maritime environment.</p>			

Source: Created by the author

Moreover, according to *article 77* (United Nations, 1982:54) of UNCLOS a coastal state has *exclusive sovereign rights* –not depending on the state’s (effective or notional) occupation or any express proclamation– as far as the exploration of its Continental Shelf and the exploitation of the (living and non-living) natural resources of the seabed and subsoil in it are concerned, which means that if a state wants to undertake such an activity in another state’s Continental Shelf the latter must provide its express consent.

As far as the laying of *submarine cables* and *pipelines* on the Continental Shelf is concerned, *article 79* provides that all states –showing respect to the submarine cables and pipelines that have already

been laid— can undertake such an activity on the condition that the coastal state must give consent for the delineation of their *course* and can take reasonable measures to protect its *maritime environment* (United Nations, 1982:54), while *article 81* provides that the authorization and regulation of *drilling* on the Continental Shelf for all purposes is an *exclusive right* belonging to the coastal state (United Nations, 1982:54).

Finally, *article 74* (United Nations, 1982:52) and *article 83* (United Nations, 1982:56) of UNCLOS define respectively that the *delimitation* of the *EEZ* and the *Continental Shelf* between two states that have opposite or adjacent coasts must be effected via *agreement* made on the basis of International Law, achieving an *equitable solution*. In case an agreement cannot be reached between the conflicting parties, *article 279* (United Nations, 1982:129) provides that the settlement of their dispute can be resolved by resorting in *peaceful means*, which according to *article 33* of the UN Charter (United Nations, 1945:8) include: (i) negotiation, (ii) enquiry, (iii) mediation, (iv) conciliation, (v) arbitration, (vi) judicial settlement, (vii) resort to regional agencies or arrangements, and (viii) other peaceful means of their own choice.

Table 2. The current status of Greece’s maritime zones

Maritime Zone	Territorial Sea	EEZ	Continental Shelf	Remarks
Ionian Sea	12 nm	Partially Delimited	Partially Delimited	Agreement with Italy Pending with Libya & Albania
Aegean Sea	6 nm	Not Proclaimed	Not Delimited	Pending with Turkey
Cretan Sea	6 nm	Partially Delimited	Partially Delimited	Agreement with Egypt Pending with Libya, Egypt & Cyprus

Source: Created by the author

The Gradual Delimitation of Greece’s Maritime Zones

As far as the current status and breadth of the maritime zones are concerned, Greece has gradually proclaimed and defined their extent (Table 2) through several bilateral agreements which were ratified and made public via the following Laws:

1. *Law 230* that was published on *13 October 1936*, defining the extent of the Greek *territorial sea* to 6 nm (Journal of the Government of the Hellenic Republic, 1936:2387).

2. *Law 786* that was published on *21 June 1978*, which ratified the agreement that was signed on *24 May 1977* between Greece and *Italy* on the delimitation of their *continental shelf* using the median line method (Journal of the Government of the Hellenic Republic, 1978).
3. *Law 4001* that was published on *22 August 2011*, defining inter alia that in the absence of an agreement for the delimitation of Greek Continental Shelf and EEZ, their outer limit is the median line (Journal of the Government of the Hellenic Republic, 2011:3873).
4. *Law 4716* that was published on *28 August 2020*, which ratified the agreement that was signed on *9 June 2020* between Greece and *Italy* on the use of the median line as the method of delimitation of their *maritime zones* (Journal of the Government of the Hellenic Republic, 2020a).
5. *Law 4717* that was published on *28 August 2020*, which ratified the agreement that was signed on *6 August 2020* between Greece and *Egypt* on the partial delimitation of their *EEZ* (Journal of the Government of the Hellenic Republic, 2020b).
6. *Law 4767* that was published on *21 January 2021*, defining the extent of the Greek *territorial sea* in the *Ionian Sea* to *12 nm* (Journal of the Government of the Hellenic Republic, 2021).
7. *Presidential Decree 33* that was published on *17 April 2025*, declaring the Greek *EEZ* in the *Ionian Sea* (Journal of the Government of the Hellenic Republic, 2025).⁴

The Maritime Dimension of the Greek-Turkish Conflict

Despite the fact that the Greek-Turkish conflict comprises many issues, the vast majority of them are related to the maritime zones of the two states (Koukakis, 2024c:84). It must also be stressed that Greece has endorsed the provisions of UNCLOS via *Law 2321* on *23 June 1995* (Journal of the Government of the Hellenic Republic, 1995), while *Turkey* has not ratified UNCLOS (United Nations, 2024) as it does not accept several of its provisions (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.a). To be more precise, *Turkey* claims (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020) inter alia that:

1. The delimitation of both the *Continental Shelf* and the *EEZ* must not be done by applying the method of the *median line*, but through the principle of *equity* taking into consideration geographical circumstances and other factors such as proportionality, non-encroachment, proximity, etc.
2. The *islands* do not automatically have jurisdiction in maritime zones and must have a *reduced* or *no effect* in the delimitation of maritime zones.

⁴ The limits of the EEZ referred in the *Presidential Decree 33* were the ones defined in *Law 4716/2020*.

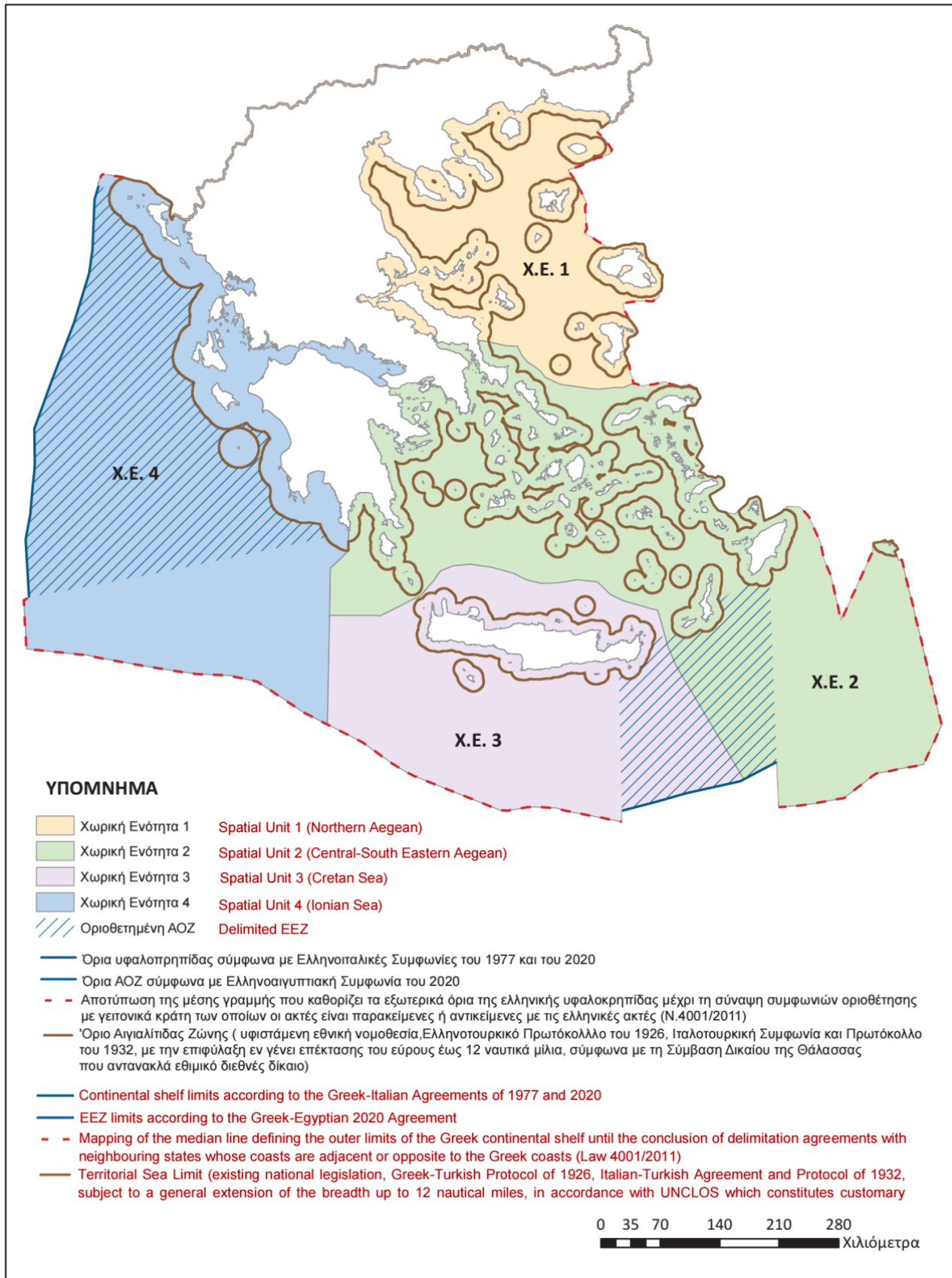
3. The breadth of the *territorial sea* must not be extended by Greece from *6 n.m.* to *12 n.m.*, as this would have inequitable implications for Turkey constituting an abuse of Greece's rights (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.b).

In the context of its aforementioned positions, Turkey signed on *27 November 2019* a *Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean* with the Government of National Accord-State of *Libya* (United Nations, 2019), an action that led the Greek government to send a letter of complaint to the United Nations, rejecting the MoU as null and void (United Nations, 2020).

Another incident that highlighted the maritime dimension of the Greek-Turkish conflict occurred on *16 April 2025*, when Greece –in the context of its membership in the European Union (European Commission, n.d.)– published its *Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP)* which depicted the limits (Figure 2) of its existing and potential (until an agreement is reached) maritime zones (Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025a).

In response, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press release on the same day claiming that the respective action violates the maritime jurisdiction of Turkey in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, and that it will not have any current or future legal consequences for Turkey (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025), as Turkey does not accept the median line method.

Figure 2. Greece’s Maritime Spatial Planning (*translation in red letters is provided by the author*)



Source: Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2025b)

Future challenges

The main challenge faced by Greece in regard to its maritime zones is to fully implement the respective provisions of UNCLOS in the *Aegean Sea* (orange & green colour in Figure 2), in order to be able to exploit its marine resources and enhance its economy. For this to happen though, Greece must either reach an agreement with *Turkey* on the limits of their Continental Shelf and EEZ or resolve its maritime dispute through legal means (judicial settlement), a rather unlikely scenario given the aforementioned positions of Turkey on the matter. The same applies for the extension of the breadth of the Greek territorial sea from 6 n.m. to 12 n.m., as Turkey has declared since 1995 that this action would constitute a cause for war (*casus belli*) giving it the right to use military force against Greece (Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.e).

Another challenge for Greece is to reach an agreement with *Albania* on the delimitation of its maritime zones in the Northern part of the *Ionian Sea*, as the two states –despite that they agreed in 2020 to refer to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to resolve their dispute– haven't made any progress yet (Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.a). As far as the Greek maritime zones in the Southern part of the *Ionian Sea* (blue colour in Figure 2) and the Southern part of the *Cretan Sea* (purple colour in Figure 2) are concerned, Turkey's aforementioned influence in Libya has deteriorated the Greek-Libyan relations (Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.d), making –in addition to the instability that prevails in Libya– the delimitation extremely unlikely under the existing circumstances.

In regard to the Greek maritime zones in and the South and South-East *Aegean Sea*, their delimitation –despite the fact that Greece maintains very good to excellent relations with both *Egypt* (Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.c) and *Cyprus* (Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.b)– is very unlikely. As far as the Greek-Cypriot limits are concerned, the main reason for this –given the ongoing willingness of Cyprus for delimitation– is most probably the *phobic syndrome* of Greece towards Turkey, while as far as the Greek-Egyptian limits are concerned, the main reason for not completing the partial delimitation of 2020 is most probably the fact that Egypt –given the Turkish positions on the matter– does not want to provoke Turkey (Kariotis, 2021).

Concluding Remarks

Taking into consideration the information provided in the article, it is obvious that the delimitation of the Greek maritime zones is a matter that affects not only the *national security* –mostly in terms of energy security, economic security, and military security– of Greece, but also the *regional security* of Eastern Mediterranean, as it has a great impact on the bilateral relations of Turkey with Libya,

Egypt and Cyprus. That is why Greece is trying to promote the use of UNCLOS through its participation in several *regional trilateral schemes* in the Eastern Mediterranean (Koukakis, 2024b) and the Balkans and the Black Sea (Koukakis, 2024a). Finally, the fact that Greece has been elected as one of the non-permanent members of the *UN Security Council* for the 2025-2026 period (Greece for UNSC, n.d.) –a position that enhances its global influence– setting the peaceful settlement of disputes, the respect for International Law, and maritime security as three of its six priorities, provides Greece a window of opportunity for completing its pending maritime zones’ delimitation.

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