

On the Current Crisis in Turkey-Greece Relations

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Relations between Turkey and Greece are currently in a phase of escalating crisis. This development can be traced back to a number of reasons. Firstly, Turkey is in a phase of intensified “power projection” in its attempt to achieve the status of a regional power, something made evident in a series of choices: its involvement in the Syrian crisis (including invading to secure a “safe zone” and answer the “existential” threat of a quasi-state Kurdish entity in North-East Syria), active involvement in the Libyan civil war (where it played a crucial role in changing the balance of forces in favour of the Tripoli government), and the way it pushes forward its particular version of a “just” division of drilling rights in the South-East Mediterranean.

Yet it is not simply about “oil.” It is about regional power status, nationalist aspirations, and leadership (Turkey has attempted to be the main force putting forward the political agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood). This political line can be described as a renewed version of Turkish nationalism combined with a certain version of political Islam, around which important segments of the Turkish bourgeoisie and other political forces are rallying (generally with nationalist overtones).

On the other hand, Greece has gone through a period of economic crisis and reduced sovereignty (especially during the “Memoranda” period). Yet at the same time, and even since the SYRIZA government, Greek foreign policy has taken a turn for the worse. Both SYRIZA and New Democracy turned toward the US and resorted to the logic of anti-Turkish alliances with Israel, Egypt, and more recently the United Arab Emirates. This has also been the choice of the government of Cyprus. Thus, one could say that Greek foreign policy oscillates between the logic of anti-Turkish alliances (the so-called “strategy of isolating Turkey”) and the logic of negotiations that appear more difficult as Turkey tries to change the “rules of the game.” Israeli influence on Greek foreign policy has also been important, despite the fact that the country has been an obstacle to peace in the Middle East region. At the same time, the Greek government and the Greek bourgeoisie are aware that the balance of forces with Turkey is uneven, accounting for the return of the logic of dialogue despite it appearing increasingly difficult.

US Interference

The situation cannot be understood without taking into account the role of other forces. The US is very important. The antagonism between Turkey and Greece is an antagonism related to the possible role of negotiator the US could have. At the same time, there are tensions within the US political, diplomatic, and military establishment over Turkey. On the one hand, they cannot lose Turkey – Turkey must remain part of

the “West.” On the other hand, there are voices calling for a break with Turkey, particularly due to its relations with Russia. To a certain extent, those that call for a break also reflect the demands of other regional players such as Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. These differences and tensions in US policy are also reflected in the oscillations of Greek foreign policy, especially when there is hope of isolating Turkey.

Germany has emerged as negotiator, as was the case in the Libyan crisis. The German logic is one of avoiding conflicts and entering negotiations, despite lacking the military strength required for such a role. At the same time, it is obvious that the German stance is also motivated by the need to maintain a certain level of EU-Turkey relations to keep the EU-Turkey refugee deal going (especially since it is crucial for the broader European anti-refugee and anti-immigration policies) and avoid alienating German citizens of Turkish origin. France, on the other hand, as part of its constant effort to remind people that it is a “great power,” has attempted to counter the Turkish quest for a greater role in the region (especially since Turkey has been attempting to extend its influence not only in the Middle East but also Africa, thereby colliding with French interests there), albeit without offering a more comprehensive plan. Forces like Israel, the UAE, and Egypt are also trying to put pressure on Turkey. However, these pressures are related to other issues. If Turkey changed stances and became part of an anti-Iran coalition, the tone would certainly be different. This situation in turn leads to the recurring Greek “temptation” (or fantasy) of an anti-Turkey axis.

In the past, Greece attempted to play the “European card” hoping that if Turkey entered the EU a peaceful solution to the disputes would be possible. This appeared to work until 2004, but then the rejection of the Anan plan for Cyprus and the fact that France made it clear it would oppose Turkish EU membership made the European card more difficult.

Aegean Brinksmanship

With regard to the issues in question in the current crisis: on the one hand are questions of territorial nature in the Aegean. Turkey opposes any thought of Greece expanding its territorial sea to 12 nautical miles in the Aegean (despite this being a sovereign right guaranteed by international law), considers any such expansion of Greek territory in the Aegean a “casus belli” (cause of war), and has suggested that a number of small islands are indeed Turkish territory (the so-called “grey zones”). Greece, on the other hand, has so far refrained from expanding its territorial sea in the Aegean to 12 nautical miles, sticking to the six nautical mile limit, although Greece’s airspace is actually at 10 nautical miles. With regard to the small islands, Greece insists that they are all described in the treaties as Greek territory. On the other hand, there are questions concerning the extent of the continental shelf and the EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone). Greece insists that international law is on its side and that the islands have their own continental shelf, which means 200 nautical miles or the middle line if the distance is smaller.

Turkey insists that such a reading of international law is unfair and leaves the country with a very small continental shelf and EEZ (along with drilling rights), and insists that the islands do not have their own continental shelf. Greece has not delineated its continental shelf in the Aegean, yet insists that this is a right by itself. Greece has drawn a “red line” with regard to the continental shelf in seismic exploration. It is important to note that the sea over the supposed continental shelf is considered international waters, but Greece insists that seismic exploration relates to the continental shelf and thus represent a violation of a sovereign right. Consequently, in the past weeks Greek Navy ships have tried to impede seismic exploration by a Turkish research vessel in areas that Greece insists are part of its continental shelf. However, despite the rhetoric of “international law is on our side,” Greek governments are aware that any attempt to bring this issue before an international body such as the International Criminal Court in The Hague will end with Turkey getting more – specifically, a large part of the continental shelf associated with the island of Kastellorizo.

Turkey took advantage of the support it gave to the Tripoli government, which is still the internationally recognized government of Libya, and signed an agreement on delineating their respective EEZs in a manner that adheres to Turkey’s reading of the Law of the Sea, namely without taking the Greek islands into consideration. This created a negative precedent for Greece, which insisted that it was an illegal agreement. However, international law and in particular these aspects of it do not rest only on abstract principles (“all islands have their own EEZ or continental shelf”) but also on the principle of mutual recognition and finding middle ground. This created a new dynamic of tension this summer, with Turkey insisting on sending research ships to the contested area. After a first round of tension, a German initiative sought a moratorium on such research surveys and any moves that could be considered aggressive. Turkey initially accepted it. However, after a while there was a probable American intervention and Greece managed to sign a partial agreement with Egypt on delineating EEZs. The agreement is partial because it left out areas disputed by Egypt and Libya and the area where only a multilateral agreement including Turkey, Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece would suffice. Yet Turkey perceived this as a violation of the previous agreement, and again sent out the research vessel accompanied by Turkish Navy ships, which in turn meant that Greece also sent Navy ships to the area. The high point of the tension was the collision between a Greek frigate and Turkish frigate on 12 August.

A Rivalry between Two Ruling Classes

Apart from the technical aspects relating to international law, it is obvious that we are dealing with a case of antagonism between two states (and two bourgeoisies) in the context of contemporary imperialism – but also shifting regional alliances. It is not just another “territorial dispute,” but rather a struggle for power, influence, and regional hegemony within the imperialist chain. Moreover, for both countries this antagonism is also a way to deal with internal contradictions and create some form of “national unity” (and take advantage of the “disciplinary” aspects of a national crisis).

Turkey has been more aggressive recently, but Greece has also entered the dangerous logic of “anti-Turkey” alliances and adopted a “we will answer any provocation” attitude. Are we facing the possibility of an armed confrontation between the two countries? It is difficult to say. Both governments appear to fear military confrontation, but on the other hand, the danger is real, as there is a certain temptation that limited military confrontation could function as a catalyst for negotiation. In this sense, the presence of so many potential “negotiators” is what actually makes things more difficult and dangerous.

There are nevertheless reasons for the two countries to seek to avoid any such confrontation, even of smaller scale. On the Greek side, there is the fear that even a minor armed skirmish might lead to forced negotiation on negative terms. On the Turkish side, there is the fear that an armed confrontation would be the result of a provocation by forces who seek to portray Turkey as an aggressor. But the way the tension is evolving – the fact that both countries deployed naval forces in the Aegean, the fact that we have already had a collision between two frigates, the “red lines” that both countries have drawn, and the increased nationalist rhetoric – makes an “accident” even more possible. This is the real danger.



With regard to the positions taken by Greek political parties in the Greece-Turkey conflict, it is important to note that New Democracy, SYRIZA, and KINAL (the successor to PASOK) pursue a similar approach. The idea is to get the US and the EU to put pressure on Turkey, to take advantage of the recent attempts toward alliances with countries such as Israel, Egypt, and more recently the United Arab Emirates, and

exploit France's attempt to develop a strong presence in the Mediterranean. At the same time, the Greek government has also tried to project military force mainly by sending the Greek Navy to prevent Turkish research vessels from conducting seismic exploration within the area Greece insists belongs to the Greek continental shelf, but also with air and naval exercises in the disputed areas.

This has been combined with more or less symbolic attempts to show that Greece is exercising its "sovereign rights." This is obvious in the decision to expand Greece's territorial sea to 12 nautical miles in the Ionian Sea and south of the Peloponnese – areas that are not disputed by Turkey – a project initially designed by Nikos Kotzias, foreign minister under Alexis Tsipras. Officially, New Democracy is in favour of a dialogue with Turkey, but only with regard to the question of delineating the continental shelf and by means of an agreed appeal to the International Criminal Court. At the same time, in recent years oil and gas drilling in the South-East Mediterranean has fuelled various ambitious projections of Greece having a stake in a supposed oil and gas bonanza. In this sense, it is obvious that the Greek state would like to secure the greatest possible area for its EEZ in the south, and also attempt to build, in an aggressive manner, alliances around such a goal – one example being the "EastMed pipeline" that would run from Israel to Greece and then Europe. It is justifiable to say that although both SYRIZA and New Democracy try to insist that Greece is merely defending itself, the country has been part of a regional antagonistic drive for both resources as well as influence.

Bipartisan Aggression

Even more problematic – and potentially dangerous – has been the kind of alliances promoted by both SYRIZA and New Democracy in government. The idea that Israel, an occupying force that promotes instability in the region, could be a useful ally is one example. The same goes for cooperation with the authoritarian regimes in Egypt or Saudi Arabia. At the same time, there is the problem of constant appeals to the US and EU as potential negotiators – which not only enhances Greece's attachment to imperialist projects, but also runs the risk of generating increased tension between the two countries, including the risk of armed conflict.

Apart from this line, there have been two other opposing tendencies in how Greek governments and the Greek bourgeoisie treat relations between Greece and Turkey. One is what is traditionally described in the Greek context as the "patriotic" line that insists on a more aggressive stance vis-à-vis Turkey, unilateral declarations of sovereign rights (e.g. Greece declaring full rights to the "full extent" of its EEZ or extending territorial sea in the Aegean to 12 nautical miles), increased emphasis on anti-Turkey alliances, and readiness for a military confrontation. This position usually looks to the PASOK governments under Andreas Papandreou as an example, although the actual politics of that period were more complex. The Greek far-right also takes similar positions.

The other position is what can be described as the appeasement approach. This position has been advocated by different political currents, segments of the centre-right and centre-left, as well as the post-Eurocommunist Left. Here the emphasis is on the need for negotiation and compromise in order to achieve peace, even if this means greater concessions than the supposed “patriotic line.” This line has influenced Greek foreign policy on different occasions, although it never became dominant, essentially because there were always calculations of political cost.

In a certain way, one might say that in the current conjuncture of a country facing a serious economic crisis, many segments of the bourgeoisie would have opted for such an approach – and to a certain extent this might be even true of the Greek government (or at least of part of it). However, the difficulty of such an approach is twofold: on the one hand, there is the problem of how to proceed with negotiations when Turkey seems to be more than aggressive. On the other hand, there is the problem that a rhetoric of dialogue in the face of aggression might come across as some form of capitulation.

Charting a Left Response

The various currents of the Greek Left have adopted several different approaches. There is what can be described as the “anti-imperialist” position, supported by the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and in various forms by currents of the anti-capitalist Left. According to this position, the main problem is that Greece is a member of NATO and the EU and thus runs the danger of being part of antagonisms and conflicts that could lead to armed conflicts. This is sometimes combined with a parallel emphasis on the ambitions of the Greek bourgeoisie and how they fuel the antagonism, whereas in the version of the KKE and other tendencies the aspect of Turkish aggression against Greek sovereignty is also stressed.

Although anti-imperialist positions grasp the context of modern imperialism and how it is connected to this particular regional antagonism, at the same time some of these positions tend to underestimate the particular dynamics of the conflict and even suggest that certain aspects of the conflict are orchestrated by imperialist forces. Moreover, in some versions of classical anti-imperialist positions, Greece’s responsibility for the antagonism is underestimated.

Then there are positions that insist that this is an antagonism between clashing bourgeoisies, against which it is necessary to adopt an internationalist position against aggression and war. This is combined with an emphasis on the fact that the dispute is not about sovereignty but rather claims to drilling rights, thus leading to a “No blood for oil” position, in certain cases also linked to the impending climate catastrophe and the need to put a halt to drilling as part of the struggle against fossil fuels.

This position stresses the importance of the antagonisms between the two bourgeoisies, but tends to underestimate the role of the imperialist context. Moreover, in some versions of this position there is a tendency to present the two countries as equally aggressive, thus running the risk of underestimating the current Turkish government’s

aggressive nationalism. At the same time, such positions tend to exaggerate the power or aggression of Greek capital. What, then, could starting points for a radical left perspective on this complex issue be? I can only make some suggestions.

- Acknowledging all the aspects of the conflict and not simply projecting pre-determined ideological constructions upon a specific conjuncture is crucial. If it is important to deny Greek nationalism and all the ideological myths associated with it, including the idea that Greece is supposedly on the “defensive” side or “on the right side of international law,” it is equally important to acknowledge the nationalist character of Turkish foreign policy, the threats to peace in the broader region that attempts to become a “regional power” pose, and how it combines with an authoritarian regime at home and constant aggression against the Kurdish movement.
- Peace and stability cannot be achieved by means of imperialist intervention or mediation, whether from the US or EU. By contrast, imperialist intervention and potential mediation fuels the conflict and poses a danger to peace. In this sense, it is necessary to disengage Greek foreign policy from its current attachment to the US and EU.
- The logic of anti-Turkey alliances with countries that are authoritarian, reactionary, violate international law, or undermine peace processes must be abandoned. A different foreign policy must express solidarity with movements that fight for democracy and self-determination, beginning with the necessary solidarity with Palestine.
- Solidarity between movements in Turkey and Greece is very important in such a conjuncture, as it can be a way to counter nationalism and assist the emergence of anti-war resistance on both sides of the border.
- In a time where climate change represents a global emergency, it is necessary to promote the idea of a moratorium on research for fossil fuels in the Mediterranean.
- With regard to the actual dispute, it is important to promote the idea of a negotiation that could help de-escalate tensions and potentially enable a compromise leading to peaceful co-existence. Such a perspective could mean both a compromise approach with regard to the delineation of the EEZ and continental shelf that could answer any Turkish fears of being deprived of access to resources, as well as offer guarantees to the Greek side that there will be an end to disputes over territorial rights in the Aegean.
- In the long run, a lasting peace on both sides depends on the emergence of truly democratic and progressive political solutions in both countries. Relations between Greece and Turkey offer an example of how neoliberalism can be combined with authoritarianism nationalism, “power projections,” and antagonisms over regional power and resources. A different balance of class forces within each country is a necessary aspect of any lasting peace. •