



Greece and Türkiye —Toward a New Start in Bilateral Relations?

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The visit of Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to Türkiye on 13 May is part of the normalisation of relations between the two countries. Mitsotakis' meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not bring a breakthrough in bilateral relations but the sides declared their willingness to maintain open channels of communication, which is positive. This will promote the stability in the Mediterranean and may also contribute to improving Türkiye's relations with the U.S. and the EU.

Effects of the Visit. The meeting between Prime Minister Mitsotakis and President Erdoğan saw the establishment of the Turkish-Greek Business Council, the signing of a cooperation protocol on disaster and emergency management, and an agreement in the field of health and medical sciences.

Although Turkish-Greek relations have been characterised by heightened periods of tension for years, Erdoğan brought to the fore during the press conference an exchange about [Hamas](#), in the wake of the Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip. Türkiye, unlike Greece, does not recognise Hamas as a terrorist organisation, but representatives of the two countries unanimously agreed that an immediate ceasefire should be implemented in the ongoing conflict. Erdoğan referred approvingly to Greek support for Palestine in the UN General Assembly vote to grant the latter full UN membership.

The Evolution of Bilateral Relations in Recent Years. Although Türkiye and Greece are neighbours and members of the North Atlantic Alliance, they share a long history of disputes. In addition to the unresolved issue of [Cyprus'](#) status, one of the most long-standing conflicts is over territorial issues. The Greek side argues that it has the right to extend its territorial waters from 6 to 12 nautical miles and expand its exclusive economic zone in the Aegean Sea, citing the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Türkiye, which is not a party to the convention, opposes Greece's efforts and points out that such a move would

impede its access to international waters. In 1995, the Turkish Grand National Assembly passed a resolution declaring Greece's expansion of its territorial waters in the Aegean Sea beyond 6 nautical miles into the sea an act of war (*casus belli*).

The dispute between the countries also involves small inhabited and uninhabited islands located in the Aegean Sea between Türkiye and Greece. In 2022, Türkiye began accusing Greece of militarising them. Another conflict in bilateral relations is the control of airspace around the islands. Greece claims control of 10 miles of airspace over the area, while Türkiye recognises only 6 miles and claims that its fighter jets move through international airspace. Mitsotakis, during his trip to the United States, criticised Türkiye for an increase in airspace violations in May 2022. At the time, the Greek prime minister, in a speech to the U.S. Congress, called for maintaining opposition to the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Türkiye. In response, Erdoğan ruled out holding further direct talks with Mitsotakis.

Gas discoveries by Israel, Cyprus, and Egypt have prompted Türkiye to send drilling ships to the eastern Mediterranean. Turkish claims to energy resources, coupled with ongoing disagreements over maritime borders, have intensified tensions in the region. Adding to the pressure was the exclusion of Türkiye by Greece and Cyprus from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), an international organisation established in 2019 to enable cooperation

between the region's countries interested in developing and exploiting gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean.

An important event that influenced the initiation of the normalisation process in Turkish-Greek relations was the [earthquake](#) that hit southeastern Türkiye in February 2023. Greece was one of the first countries to offer humanitarian aid, which was met with a positive response from Turkish society and authorities. The good atmosphere in neighbourly relations was maintained during Erdoğan's visit to Greece last December, during which the "Athens Declaration on Friendly Relations and Good Neighbourliness" was signed. The fact that an agreement was reached is significant because the parties pledged to work together for the benefit of the peoples of both countries in an environment of friendship and trust, something that seemed impossible just four years ago. The desire to maintain good relations is evidenced by the fact that in the second part of the agreement, Erdoğan and Mitsotakis expressed their will to increase the volume of trade from \$5 billion to \$10 billion.

European and Transatlantic Dimensions of Turkish-Greek Relations. The escalation in Turkish-Greek conflicts prompted the 2019 actions. The EU Council placed sanctions on Türkiye over the country's unauthorised drilling in the eastern Mediterranean (the sanctions were extended until November this year). Escalating delimitation disputes and increased competition for offshore resource extraction, combined with mutual accusations of violating international law and pursuing an expansionist foreign policy, brought the countries to the brink of war in the fall of 2020. In October of that year, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg initiated a bilateral military deconfliction mechanism between Greece and Türkiye to reduce the risk of incidents in the eastern Mediterranean.

In the midst of its ongoing disputes with Türkiye, Greece found an ally in France. This was reflected in the French-Greek defence pact concluded in September 2021. Representatives of the Turkish side considered it to be directed against Türkiye, as it covered not only threats coming from outside NATO, but also from within the Alliance.

The formalisation of cooperation in the region within the framework of the EMGF, gained the approval of the EU, the

United States, and the World Bank, which were granted observer status in the organisation. As part of the cooperation, [the East Med and Poseidon pipelines](#), transporting Israeli and Cypriot gas to Greece and Italy, are planned. In 2022, the U.S. withdrew its support for the project due to what it said were excessive political and financial costs of its implementation. The resignation of the United States from supporting the project, in which one of the leading roles was to be played by Greece along with Cyprus, was conducive to breaking Türkiye's isolation in the region.

Conclusions and Outlook. Prime Minister Mitsotakis' visit to Türkiye was important in terms of continuing the normalisation of relations between the countries. It will have a positive impact on the state of Türkiye's relations with the U.S., which advocates a policy of balance in Türkiye's relations with Greece. The improvement in Turkish-Greek relations may translate into the countries' cooperation in the field of migration at the EU level. Despite the positive gestures in bilateral relations, it is impossible to speak of a breakthrough, as neither side has revised its position [in the delimitation disputes](#).

Representatives of the parties declare their willingness to resolve conflicts through dialogue, rather than through the escalation of political and military tensions, which in the long term will be conducive to maintaining stability in the region. The favourable atmosphere in Turkish-Greek relations may be spoiled by a Greek plan to create a marine national park in the Aegean Sea, where the two countries have territorial disputes, to prevent marine pollution and protect biodiversity. Greece portrays its initiative as an ecological project to protect the marine environment. However, from the perspective of the Turkish authorities, it is politically motivated and interpreted as an attempt to expand Greek territorial waters in the Aegean Sea.

In the long term, it is in the interests of the EU and Poland to support the Turkish-Greek normalisation process, as both countries are NATO members and play an important role in the European security architecture of limiting the flow of irregular migrants into Europe.