



Greek Deterrence of Turkey: Living to Fight Another Day

by Emmanuel Karagiannis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Greece is facing a serious security challenge from Turkey, a fellow NATO country. The recent deterioration of bilateral relations has generated suspicion and distrust in Athens. The upcoming exploratory talks are bound to fail. The Greek deterrence strategy is shifting significantly because the possibility of conflict is growing.

Greece and Turkey are strange neighbors. They are bitter rivals with a history of armed conflict, but are both member-states of NATO. The list of bilateral issues between them has lengthened over the years, including the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus, the status of ethno-religious minorities, the delimitation of territorial waters, the continental shelf/Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and national airspace, and the problem of illegal immigration.

Greek-Turkish relations hit a new low on July 21, when the Erdoğan regime announced its decision to send a seismic exploration ship near the Greek island of Kastellorizo. Ankara's main objective has been to grab as much continental shelf as possible by preventing Athens from declaring an EEZ in the area. Kyriakos Mitsotakis's center-right government rose to the challenge and mobilized its fleet to disrupt a Turkish oil and gas survey in what it deems the Greek continental shelf.

This was the first time since January 1996, when the Imia crisis erupted, that Greece showed a clear willingness to use military force to defend its sovereign rights in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. After seven weeks of military standoff, Ankara withdrew its ship under European and American pressure.

The two countries are about to start exploratory talks, but this pre-negotiation process is doomed to fail for three reasons.

First, Turkey has issued new demands that the Greek government cannot accept. Ankara has cited security fears as justification for the **demilitarization of the Eastern Aegean islands** (e.g., Lemnos, Chios), though a Greek invasion is literally impossible. To make matters worse, the legal status of many Greek islands and islets has been openly questioned by Turkish officials. For example, Erdoğan's coalition partner Devlet Bahçeli (chairman of the Nationalist Movement Party) has **disputed Greek sovereignty of Dodecanese islands**, including Rhodes.

Second, the Turkish leadership has used ultra-nationalist rhetoric against Greece so unceasingly that it is now almost impossible to backtrack from it. For example, President Erdoğan **recently stated**, "In our civilization, conquest is not occupation or looting. It is establishing the dominance of the justice that Allah commanded in the [conquered] region."

Third, Turkish exploration activities have generated tensions with the Greek-speaking Republic of Cyprus that Athens cannot ignore. Nicosia has threatened to block EU sanctions against Belarus if Brussels does not take measures against Turkish illegal drilling in the Cypriot EEZ.

The likely failure of the talks could lead to more tensions and eventually conflict. The military balance is slightly in favor of Turkey. Both countries have large and well-equipped armies, but the Turks have gained significant combat experience in Libya and Syria. The two navies have similarly-sized ships, though Turkey is ahead of Greece in terms of modernization. The Turkish navy built the amphibious assault ship Anadolu, modelled after the Spanish ship Juan Carlos, to conduct long-distance combat operations in the region. Ankara has also designed and plans to build four Istanbul-class frigates with multi-role combat capabilities.

In contrast, Greece's nine aging Dutch-built frigates urgently need to be replaced. Its four German-designed MEKO-200 frigates are scheduled to be upgraded in the next few years. The Greek frigates have limited air defense capabilities and depend on the Hellenic Air Force for protection. Currently, the Greek navy's most advanced ships are seven British-designed fast attack missile boats (Roussen-class) equipped with Exocet anti-ship missiles (range of 180 km). The Turkish navy does not have an equivalent warship.

Additionally, the Hellenic Navy has a clear advantage over Turkey's navy in submarine warfare. Together with Israel, Greece has the most advanced conventional submarines in the Mediterranean. Due to their air-independent propulsion (AIP) system, Type 214 Papanikolis class submarines are almost undetectable by Turkish sonar.

Missile boats and submarines are Greece's ace in the hole. The Hellenic Navy is a green-water navy with considerable firepower to conduct operations in the

Aegean—but it lacks the means to project power in the deep waters of the Eastern Mediterranean.

The air forces of the two countries are comparable in size, but Greece is gaining a technological edge. The backbone of the Turkish air force is the F-16 fighter, and will remain so, since the country was kicked out of the F-35 program. Greece has a large fleet of F-16s that are going to be upgraded soon to the latest Viper model. The Hellenic Air Force also operates a number of French Mirage 2000-5s equipped with long-range SCALP missiles.

The flashpoint of the current dispute is the tiny island of Kastellorizo. Strategically located at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, the island served as a stopover for French seaplanes on the way to Lebanon and Syria in the 1930s. The island is not easily defended, though the Greek army has maintained a rather strong presence. At the same time, Greek missile boats and submarines patrol at the sea borders with Turkey. Chief of the Hellenic National Defense General Staff Konstantinos Floros has warned that any localized military **conflict would immediately lead to a full-scale Greek-Turkish war**. Greece is apparently switching from deterrence-by-defense to deterrence-by-punishment. In practical terms, the Greek army could choose to respond elsewhere where victory is more likely (e.g., the Evros River region).

New tensions with Turkey have prompted Athens to reconsider its priorities. On September 12, **Greek PM Mitsotakis announced new weapons purchases**, including the 18 new and used Rafales, four frigates, and four anti-submarine helicopters. Greece is also likely to obtain 20 F-35 stealth fighters after 2025. The ministry of defense will recruit 15,000 soldiers over the next five years to support the professionalization of the Greek military. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, Athens has established a new **Joint Special Operations Command** for Greece's elite units to operate primarily in the Aegean Sea.

Athens has firmly supported a peaceful settlement of Greek-Turkish disputes based on the principles and norms of international law. The Greek government has favored dialogue and cooperation with Turkey because it is a win-win for both sides. In fact, Greece remains a staunch advocate of Turkish membership in the EU. However, there is new thinking in Athens about how to deal with Turkey. It was recently expressed by Greece's first **female president Katerina Sakellaropoulou**: if you want to have peace, you must always be prepared for war.

Emmanuel Karagiannis is an Associate Professor in King's College London's Department of Defence Studies. He is author of The New Political Islam: Human Rights, Democracy and Justice (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).