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AN HONEST BROKER NO LONGER: THE UNITED STATES BETWEEN TURKEY AND GREECE

RYAN GINGERAS
COMMENTARY

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Over the course of 2022, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has maintained a steady drumbeat of provocations targeting Greece. The year began with his foreign ministry issuing a statement threatening to declare Greece's sovereignty as "debatable" if it continued to "militarize" its Aegean islands. Since threatening to move against Greece's Aegean territories in September, Turkey's president has seized upon the unveiling of a new line of ballistic missiles as an opportunity to up the ante. He boasted that the country's new Tayfun missiles had "driven the Greeks crazy" and noted that Athens could now be comfortably targeted. At the start of December, he echoed these sentiments again and added that Greece "should not stay comfortable." If Athens attempted to ship American weapons to its Aegean islands, "a country like Turkey," he enigmatically warned, "will probably not pick pears." American representatives have responded to these threats with public admonitions. State Department Spokesperson Ned Price recently reiterated Washington's "regret" over Erdogan's provocations. "All that an escalation of rhetoric will do," he emphasized, "is to raise tensions and to distract us from the unity of purpose ... that we need to confront any number of challenges," namely the dangers of a more aggressive Russia.

Just what the United States would do in response to a Turkish assault against Greece is even more opaque. Time and again, U.S. officials have been steadfast in accenting the need for solidarity and coordination among NATO allies in the face of Russia's war on Ukraine. Publicly outlining the consequences of a Turkish attack on Greece undoubtedly would be interpreted as an admission that the alliance is weaker and more divided than it appears.

BECOME A MEMBER

There is also a possibility that many pundits believe that they have seen this movie before. Animosity derived from a long line of wars and atrocities lie at the heart of Turkish-Greek relations. Since the first decade of the Cold War, Turkey and Greece have feuded over issues of sovereignty and security. The two countries have threatened to go to war on multiple occasions in recent memory, only to pull back from the brink. At several junctures, the United States played an instrumental role in soothing tensions. Given this history, one may be forgiven in believing that this current fever, too, will break. If a crisis does come to pass, history appears to endow the United States with the credibility to serve as a potential broker. Perhaps, then, there is no need for the Biden administration to be ahead of the curve.

A closer look at the historical record and present-day trends suggests that things may be changing. If one compares the past to the present, Washington's trilateral relations with Athens and Ankara has evolved considerably. This break in continuity has grown considerably in the last decade. Perhaps most importantly, contemporary Turkish views of both the past and present tend to cast its alliance with the United States in starkly negative terms. A desire to undo the perceived damage of U.S. involvement in the region is among the factors that inspire Erdogan's recent threats. To believe, therefore, that past precedent would aid the United States in

successfully mediating a present-day Greco-Turkish crisis may be ill-founded. More pointedly, should events come to a head between Ankara and Athens, Washington may be left to make a series of unenviable choices.

A Partner and a Peacemaker: A Brief History of American Mediation in Turkish-Greek Affairs

Washington's first direct foray into Greco-Turkish relations came at the conclusion of World War II. Before the close of the conflict, Allied representatives understood that something had to be done about Italian colonial possessions in the Mediterranean. Among the lands Rome governed were the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea. Amid the war, military bases on the islands had been used to interdict Mediterranean traffic. In agreeing to strip Italy of the Dodecanese, American negotiators believed the island would be best served under Greece's rule (Greek Orthodox Christian majorities dominated each of the 11 islands). The Soviet Union, however, initially demurred from granting the islands to Greece, leaving U.S. and British officials to suspect Moscow was wary of the islands' strategic potential — even though an earlier U.S. assessment believed the Dodecanese held “no significant value either for surface warships or for air bases.” Despite Turkey's neutrality during World War II (which precluded it from Allied decision-making), American negotiators were sensitive to the history of tensions between Ankara and Athens. These factors led Washington to endorse a plan to “demilitarize” the islands. Per their reading of historical precedent, the Allies agreed that Greece would be allowed to maintain local security forces at the price of prohibiting

permanent naval bases and fortifications (be they Greek or foreign). Such an arrangement, American officials contended, would help maintain regional stability.

Such strategic thinking continued to prevail in Washington as the Cold War began. Between 1950 and 1974, American relations between Greece and Turkey remained anchored to a policy of capacity building and amicability based on shared security interests. Until the 1970s, U.S. policymakers proved successful in maintaining the peace between Ankara and Athens in spite of a series of crises. The focal point of these tensions, the question of Cypriot sovereignty, led both Greece and Turkey to threaten to deepen their ties to Moscow as a way of leveraging greater American support. When Ankara threatened to invade Cyprus in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson issued a strongly worded letter to Turkish Prime Minister Ismet Inonu threatening a series of consequences should an attack commence. Johnson specifically intimated that a Cyprus invasion would force Ankara's NATO allies to reconsider their "obligation to protect Turkey against the Soviet Union," who some feared would intervene on the island in the event of conflict. Even as Greco-Turkish relations worsened into the 1970s, American officials were sure they were capable of bridging the gap between the two sides. "Both states would like to be less dependent on the US," one intelligence estimate read in June 1974. Even in the worst-case scenario, it seemed likely "that Athens and Ankara would seek—undoubtedly through US mediation—to prevent larger-scale conflict."

Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in July 1974 tested the certainty of this assessment. Though American arbitration did help avert a full-fledged war

between Greece and Turkey, Washington's ties with both Athens and Ankara weakened considerably. Greece, having felt betrayed by the United States, briefly withdrew from NATO's military command structure and sought closer relations with the Soviet Union. Despite having secured its goals in intervening into Cyprus, Turkish officials were left scarred after the U.S. Congress imposed a three-year arms embargo on Turkey. Nevertheless, the core assumption of the 1974 assessment appeared validated.

Washington endured as the preferred mediator between Greece and Turkey after a string of territorial disputes in the Aegean in the 1970s and 1980s. As it had earlier in the Cold War, shared concerns over NATO's integrity provided a base for negotiations between Washington, Ankara, and Athens. U.S. officials equally understood that both Greek and Turkish leaders saw a need in currying American and European favor if they were to achieve their respected aims. Neither Turkey nor Greece, as one CIA analyst put it in 1978, "can afford to leave the field to its rival by bolting the West altogether." The personal rapport and engagement of senior American leaders also proved instrumental in easing tensions. Henry Kissinger negotiated directly with Greek, Cypriot, and Turkish leaders through the early 1970s. When Ankara and Athens came to the threshold of war over a dispute over their conflicting claims to an uninhabited island in 1998, Bill Clinton spoke directly to Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller late into the night in the hopes of avoiding conflict. This investment on the part of U.S. officials, however, did breed a certain amount of exasperation within senior circles. The enduring nature of Greco-Turkish tensions, as well as pressures to pick

a side in their disputes, led to private expressions of cynicism. “The worst rat race I have ever been in,” Dean Acheson once chirped, was denying “Greeks and Turks their historic recreation of killing one another.”

Changing Times and Perceptions: Recent Turns in America’s Relationship with Greece and Turkey

The threat of a Greco-Turkish rupture subsided considerably as Washington’s Global War on Terror began. As U.S. officials slipped more into the background, U.N. mediation efforts in Cyprus, as well as intermittent bilateral efforts at improving ties, led to expressions of hope that the threat of conflict had subsided. Below the surface, however, there were significant changes in the ways in which Turkish policymakers perceived both Greece and the United States. Central to this change was the establishment of a new ethos with respect to foreign policy. The architect of this new outlook, Ahmet Davutoglu, counseled then-Prime Minister Erdogan to take a more assertive, ambitious approach to both regional and global relations. In addition to reimagining Turkey as a leader within the wider Islamic world, Davutoglu asserted that Turkey possessed a historic right to play a more hegemonic role in its near broad (going so far as to use the Nazi term “lebensraum” in describing Ankara’s strategic imperatives). As for Greece, Davutoglu suggested that Turkey “had grown too accustomed” to tensions with Athens even though Ankara’s handling of Greek relations was like “a heavyweight wrestler training with light weights.” The West, he argued, had habitually used Greece to intimidate Turkey, thus preventing it from opening “its horizons to action-oriented, large-scale and global policies.”

For many Turks, including Erdogan, events in the last decade have confirmed Davutoglu's broader assessment. Cyprus's decision in 2011 to commence drilling for natural gas off its southern shore reignited long-standing antagonisms over Turkish, Greek, and Cypriot maritime rights in the Mediterranean and Aegean. Despite Ankara's standing commitment to "zero problems" with its neighbors, Erdogan vowed to resist international pressure when it came to Turkish interests at sea. "From now on," he declared in 2011, "we will continue to implement whatever our national interests require without hesitation." It was in the wake of this pronouncement that the term "Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*)" began to take its place within the Turkish lexicon as a way of describing Ankara's maximalist interpretation of its maritime rights. Erdogan's stewing belligerence was further nurtured as a result of Turkey's growing rift with the United States. As Washington drew closer to Syria's Kurdish militants after 2014, boosters of the Blue Homeland policy began to accuse the United States of plotting to close off Turkey from the sea the with aid of Greece, Cyprus, and Syria's Kurds. Although Turkish officials were initially hesitant to back the accusations publicly, such sentiment echoed Erdogan's declaration in 2017 that there was a "project to besiege our country" led by Turkey's foreign and domestic enemies.

This conspiracy theory became more mainstream as a result of deepening U.S.-Greek relations. In the fall of 2017, President Donald Trump welcomed Greece's Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to Washington in the hopes of expanding military and political ties with Athens. A number of incentives push American officials in this direction. With Greece only beginning to

emerge from a near-decade-long depression, both Tsipras and the Trump White House saw mutual economic benefits in expanding American energy and trade interests. Perhaps more importantly, increased tensions with Ankara after the 2016 coup attempt encouraged many in Washington to see Greece as a potentially more stable security partner in the eastern Mediterranean. For commentators in Greece, building stronger bonds with the United States was an ironic but necessary turn. Profound historical misgivings regarding American interests still pervaded Greek society (particularly as a result of U.S. support for Greece's Cold War-era dictatorship). Yet the changing geopolitical environment in the region, particularly as a result of a more aggressive Russia, compelled Tsipras's government to seek "the familiar, warm 'embrace' of the traditional historical ally across the Atlantic." It was in this spirit that Athens and Washington arrived at a mutual defense cooperation agreement in the fall of 2019. The accord, which entailed expanded training opportunities and basing rights for U.S. forces in Greece, was hailed as a breakthrough that aided both countries. Greek officials, however, remained careful not to promote the agreement as an explicit anti-Turkish arrangement. Americans, one Greek columnist observed in 2018, "do not wish to 'lose Turkey' and on this it seems that Athens and Washington agree. Few serious decision-makers in the Greek capital would wish for an economic collapse of the neighbor or its attachment to the Russian sphere, an element that would automatically turn our country into a border between the West and the Middle East."

Turkish responses to the signing of the U.S.-Greek defense accord have been uniformly negative and suspicious. Since the fall of 2019, Turkish media outlets have regularly depicted the agreement as a Greco-American pact aimed at war with Turkey. Evidence for these misgivings have ranged from provocative news reports of U.S. arms transfers to Greece, accusations of joint Greek-U.S. support for Kurdish terrorist activities, and misleading maps illustrating an ominous string of “U.S. bases” spanning Greece, Cyprus, and northern Syria. With the country’s currency swooning, and his hopes for reelection in doubt, Erdogan has endorsed these conspiratorial views. He has consistently misconstrued the demilitarization status of the Aegean Islands in arguing that the United States intends to use Greece to undermine Turkey. “America currently has [nine] bases in Greece,” he declared last May. “Against whom are these bases established? ... ‘Against Russia’ is the thing that they say ... It is a lie, they are not honest. In the face of all this, their attitude towards Turkey is obvious.”

Towards a Moment of Catharsis? American Policy and the Implications of a Greco-Turkish Crisis

Erdogan’s provocative allegations are not purely the product of domestic anxieties or personal paranoia. One may say that his views represent a broad consensus on the history of America’s relationship with Turkey. It is widely believed, even among Erdogan’s opponents, that the United States has consistently sought to bridle or demean Turkey since the early stages of the Cold War. When the Trump administration publicly threatened to evict Turkey from the F-35 program, pundits in Turkey likened the ultimatum to the embarrassment brought on by Johnson’s 1964 letter warning Ankara

not to invade Cyprus. Widespread suspicions of U.S. complicity in the July 2016 coup attempt echo a commonly held belief that the United States aided the formation of a military junta in 1980. It is not uncommon for pundits and former officials to suggest that the destruction of Turkey had always been a part of an American-led Western project. This premise is arguably central to how Erdogan himself sees the past, present, and future of U.S.-Turkish relations. His “new Turkey,” as it is often described, differs from the old precisely because he has successfully untethered the country from any patron or broker. “Turkey is not the old Turkey,” Erdogan’s director of communications declared. “Now there is a Turkey that protects its interests at all costs and demands eye-level relations with every interlocutor and on every stage.”

Aaron Stein recently posed that “there is no broad rapprochement in the making for Turkish-Western relations.” With Ankara poised to expand its cooperation with Russia, and perhaps widen its footprint in northern Syria, there is, he argues, “little — if anything — that can be done to manage Turkey and its foreign policy aspirations.” If this is indeed the case, America’s position between Turkey and Greece appears especially grim. In spite of the past, Erdogan’s positioning appears to negate Washington’s place as a mediator between the two neighbors. While it is possible that Brussels may be more successful in closing the divide, the possibility exists that even European mediation may have only limited success. Although some have argued that Erdogan’s posturing may be an election ploy, there appears to be little room for compromise between Greece’s sovereign rights and Ankara’s strategic designs. Moreover, as one Turkish pundit recently

mused, the wind now may be at Turkey's back. With war raging in Ukraine, the West may be compelled to stomach a Turkish attack, for the sake of NATO unity, as it had during Turkey's 1974 invasion of Cyprus. These fundamental conditions may very well push Ankara towards war with Athens within the foreseeable future.

Where does that leave the United States? The threat of a Turkish attack upon Greece compels Washington to contend with several undesirable scenarios. If Erdogan intends to wage war, the façade of balancing between Athens and Ankara may become impossible to maintain. For Washington, maintaining peace may come down to two unfavorable choices. U.S. officials could pressure Athens to cede aspects of its sovereignty. Further still, the Biden Administration could abruptly abandon its mutual defense cooperation agreement with Greece. Otherwise, it is more likely the U.S. may be left with the no other alternative but to act as the de facto guarantor of Greece's territorial sovereignty. Embracing that role, even if it deters Ankara in the short term, puts American policymakers in the contradictory position of having to plan for a possible military conflict with an allied state. The mere suggestion that the United States anticipates a clash with the Turkish military undoubtedly would raise questions regarding the integrity of the NATO alliance — let alone Turkey's future as a U.S. partner.

If the United States is obliged to come to Greece's defense, policymakers in Washington may be forced to do something even more profound: Reimagine Turkey as a direct competitor or adversary. Adjusting to such a reality would certainly be a significant challenge for American policymakers. U.S. security planning, as well as NATO's defense strategy as

a whole, depends upon Turkey's support as an ally in both Europe and the Middle East. To reconceive of Turkey in antagonistic terms would therefore result in a broader geostrategic reassessment for American planners. Like an aggressive Russia, a belligerent Turkey potentially jeopardizes the free flow of traffic through the Black Sea and Mediterranean. Countering this possible threat would lead to new defense commitments, such as expanded security ties to Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt. While few in the United States may wish to see these changes come to pass, circumstances may demand that Washington recognize Turkish hostilities as a destabilizing force in the world.

BECOME A MEMBER

Ryan Gingeras is a professor in the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School and is an expert on Turkish, Balkan, and Middle East history. He is the author of six books, including the forthcoming The Last Days of the Ottoman Empire (to be released by Penguin in October 2022). His Sorrowful Shores: Violence, Ethnicity, and the End of the Ottoman Empire received short-list distinctions for the Rothschild Book Prize in Nationalism and Ethnic Studies and the British-Kuwait Friendship Society Book Prize. The views expressed here are not those of the Naval Postgraduate School, the U.S. Navy, the Department of Defense, or any part of the U.S. government.

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