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“Greece and Turkey: a Thorny Relationship?”

The current difficulties in Greek-Turkish relations have deep historical roots that directly affect how each side perceives and relates to the other¹. The Greek-Turkish relations have been affected to a great extent by the differentiation of the national political systems and the changes within the international political system. Greek-Turkish relations had long been characterized as an “enduring rivalry”².

Turkey’s relations with Greece have significantly improved since mid-1999, but the dispute over the Aegean continues to cast clouds over the relationship and could even derail the recent détente³. Recently, the tension in Greek-Turkish relations reignited after the fatal fate of a Greek fighter pilot during a dogfight over the Aegean Sea following an incident where a Turkish coastguard ship evicted a Greek fisherman from a neighbouring island of Imia.

In a key intervention by the former President of the Hellenic Republic, Costis Stephanopoulos (in an article in *Kathimerini*⁴ on May 28 2006), it was proposed that the two countries submit a long list of disputes arising from Turkish demands to the International Court of Justice at The Hague [ICJ]⁵. In this list, Mr Stephanopoulos included the extent of Greek territorial waters, the continental shelf of the Aegean islands, Turkey’s demand of Greek demilitarisation of the islands, the question of whether the Turkish war aircrafts can enter the Athens Flight Information Region (FIR) without submitting flight plans, etc. He excluded Turkish claims to Aegean rock islets as a “figment of Turkey’s imagination” on the grounds that there is no grounding on the basis of relevant international treaties.

Let us now focus on the adopted Greek policy during the last century. Greece has determined since 1931 its national air space at 10 miles, and since 1936 its territorial waters at 6 miles. This situation exists for 70 years. It is found, however, contrary to the modern perceptions. The Law of the Seas (Το Δίκαιο της Θάλασσας) defines clearly that sea and air miles should be compatible (article 2, paragraph 2)⁶. Since 1974, Turkey does not recognize as Greek air space the interval between the 6 and 10 miles. Turkish war planes have been transgressing it daily for decades. What follows is that Greek war planes intercept them and often are caused extremely dangerous dogfights. As for the militarisation of the islands, it started during the 1960s, when

¹ For background, see Tozun Bahcheli, *Greek-Turkish Relations Since 1955*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990 and James Brown, *Delicately Poised Allies: Greece and Turkey*, London: Brassey’s, 1991.

² Kemal Kirişçi, “The ‘enduring rivalry’ between Greece and Turkey: can ‘democratic peace’ break it?” *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 2002.

³ A détente that came just after the Imia crisis of 1996, the S-300 missiles and the capture of the Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan and that is owed to the so-called “civic diplomacy,” “people’s diplomacy,” or “seismic diplomacy” of the devastating earthquakes of 1999.

⁴ C. Stephanopoulos, “There is a way of resolving Greek-Turkish differences”, *Kathimerini*, 28 May 2006.

⁵ At this point it should be reminded that to go to the ICJ, Greece and Turkey would have to jointly draft a “compromis”, an agreement on exactly which questions will be submitted to the court’s jurisdiction. Turkey does not recognize the jurisdiction of the Court.

⁶ The UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (1994) defines clearly that each state has the right to determine on its own the breadth of the territorial waters as long as it does not exceed the 12 miles (article 3). In the cases where the distance of the coasts of two countries is less than 24 miles, as in many cases of Greek islands and Turkish beaches, takes effect the rule of “middle line”/«μέσης γραμμής» (article 15). This means that if in some areas Greece and Turkey are 4 miles apart, in that point the territorial waters for each country are set on 2 miles per country, while in other areas the principle of 12 miles is applied.

Greece was brought to the verge of war with Turkey because of the dramatic events in Cyprus. The islands were turned into fortresses after the Turkish invasion into Cyprus in 1974. Regarding the islands of Mytilini, Chios, Samos and Ikaria, the Treaty of Lausanne (24/7/1923) states with clarity their demilitarisation (article 13). The clause is even stricter in the Treaty of Paris (10/2/1947) regarding the Dodecanese (article 14, paragraph 2).

Costis Stephanopoulos' proposal is not a new one. At the 1999 Helsinki EU summit, which granted Turkey its candidacy, the conclusions stated that Turkey must resolve its border disputes or refer them to the ICJ by 2004. The novelty of the proposal is set on the timing of the impetus for a public dialogue. The present government seems to share a common view with Mr. Stephanopoulos. More specifically, in an interview in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, Greek Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mrs Dora Bakoyanni, stated inter alia: "If Turkey adopts a more European behaviour both in its domestic policy, with respect to the human rights, and in its foreign policy, with respect to the International Law and recognition of the International Court of Hague with regard to the regulation of contestations of sovereignty in Aegean, it will exist no other difference between Greece and Turkey"⁷.

Meanwhile, the former Prime Minister Costas Simitis maintains certain reservations for the content of the agreement that should be drawn up with Turkey, before the appeal. He proposes partial and selective extension of territorial waters, underlining simultaneously the need for Greece to impose a timetable for Turkey, in order for Turkey to fulfil its obligations⁸.

As the head of Greek diplomacy, Dora Bakoyianni, has stated in her interview the key to the final settlement in the Greek-Turkish relations lies in Turkey's europeanisation. As it is well known, the EU signed the Association Agreement with Turkey in 1963⁹. Turkey applied for a full EU membership in 1987 and got the status of a candidate country in 1999¹⁰.

Having spent four decades in the EU's waiting room, Turkey finally opened its accession negotiations with Brussels on 3 October 2005¹¹. According to the mutually agreed negotiating framework, these negotiations are "an open-ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed". It is the beginning of a long, and probably all too often daunting and difficult process. Progress depends on Turkey's efforts to meet the requirements for membership. In due course, the Union will decide if the requirements for the conclusion of negotiations are met.

However, the 'mood' in Europe is changing – some argue against Turkey. On Wednesday 28 June 2006, Turkey and Croatia's paths to joining the EU were split, after member states blocked Ankara's progress on the customs chapter of membership talks, while giving the green light for Croatia to proceed. Turkey has however only achieved progress in the market competition chapter, getting stuck on the customs chapter due to its stance on Cyprus' access to its ports and airspace, which violates a customs agreement Ankara signed with all 25-member states.

Turkey has said it will only change its position if Brussels also fulfils its political commitment to push through a trade arrangement for the northern province of Cyprus, inhabited by Turkish Cypriots. EU enlargement commissioner Olli Rehn warned earlier this month of a possible "train crash" on the country's path to EU membership if nothing changes. Until the forthcoming December it will be decided whether the European course of Turkey will continue or whether we will be led to a euro-turkish crisis.

In sum, Turkey today stands at historic crossroads. The Helsinki summit has opened the possibility of EU membership. Yet membership will require extensive changes in the Kemalist

⁷ D. Bakoyannis, "La Constitution européenne est comme la Belle au bois dormant", *Le Figaro*, 21 June 2006.

⁸ C. Simitis, "Thunder for the Greek-Turkish issues", *To Ethnos tis Kyriakis*, 17 June 2006.

⁹ OJ 1964, L 217.

¹⁰ Presidency Conclusions of the Helsinki European Council, 10/11 December 1999.

¹¹ Presidency Conclusions of the Brussels European Council, 16/17 December 2004.

system. Following Theodore Roosevelt's words in a moment of decision "do what you can, with what you have, where you are. The worst thing you can do is nothing".

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