

## THE GREEK-TURKISH CRISIS CALLS FOR NEGOTIATION

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OCTOBER  
2020

*To justify French intervention in the Greek-Turkish crisis, President Emmanuel Macron resorted to Western rhetoric that has been well-established for decades. France would react to the wrongdoings of Mr Erdogan, which would live in the fantasies of the Ottoman past. Macron presented himself as the defender of the weak against an aggressive neighbour, to restore the rule of international law, and ensure stability. However, this is an inappropriate and risky rhetoric that France should replace by a political negotiation to find an acceptable solution that keeps Turkey as a reliable member of the Western alliance.*

**T**hat Turkey has reopened in recent years its border dispute with Greece has little to do with the psychology of the Turkish President. The background lies in Turkey's increased power. Until the early 1990s, Turkey had a population five times more important than Greece, but their GDPs were comparable. In recent years, the Turkish population has represented eight times the Greek population and the Turkish GDP five times the Greek one. With a similar rate of military spending, Turkey has strengthened its capabilities compared to Greece.

This increased power has translated into an aggressive foreign policy after the Turkish government found itself in a situation of emergency. Such an assertiveness has resulted from an increasingly hostile regional environment, along with the economic shock caused by the pandemic and the fall of the Turkish lira. This is the context of Turkey's continued hydrocarbon explorations in the eastern Mediterranean, including in the vast Greek exclusive economic zone. The windfall that new gas deposits could make up in current circumstances has encouraged Turkey to take the path of a confrontation with Greece, but also with other Mediterranean powers.

### **France and Turkey on a collision course**

France has been the only significant power to deploy forces in the theatre of operations in recent months. Mr Macron has labelled his action as the quest for a "Pax Mediterranea" in the face of Turkey, which would live in "the fantasies of its own history." The roots of French rapid support for Greece are less impartial than Mr Macron has argued. France has recently intervened as much as Turkey beyond its borders to solve internal security

problems and a need for external resources. However, the incompatibility of the interventions of the two powers has placed them on a collision course.

While Turkey has looked to ensure its security in the east and south and to reduce Kurdish separatism, France has aimed at destroying the external bases of French terrorism, primarily the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria. The role of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militias in the fight against ISIS has been the first cause of antagonism.

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The second theatre of the Franco-Turkish rivalry has been in Libya. France is still active in the Sahel against the jihadist threat, but also for its supplies of raw materials. Libya's resources and its capacity to control roads and arms exports in the region are decisive. Unlike France, Turkey has supported the Government of National Accord in Tripoli (GNA) in exchange for an agreement on maritime borders in the eastern Mediterranean. Such boundaries, which ignore the Greek point of view, would offer Turkey vast opportunities for gas exploration. Turkish forces and GNA troops have recently taken over from the opposing factions the oil fields of western Libya, at the expense of French interests.

### **Eurasian rebalancing**

The Eurasian level is crucial. China's growth over the past half-century is the primary factor that can change Turkey's situation for the EU from periphery to indispensable intermediary. China's new silk roads project allows discerning major trade routes likely to cross Asia, connecting China with Europe and Africa. Powers along these routes, such as Iran, Russia, and Turkey, could expand their wealth and political influence. They could become increasingly assertive and, if needed, challenge Western supremacy over the seas that surround them. In the eastern Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the South and East China Seas, confrontations in which Western or allied warships face warships from mainland Asia have multiplied in the past decade.

Among Western nations, some have opted for a more conciliatory approach with Turkey than France. The United States has so far remained undecided. As for Germany and the countries of Central Europe, they want to expand Eurasian trade. For these countries, the Greek-Turkish conflict weakens NATO at the time of the Belarus crisis. It harms the European Union, which depends on cooperation with the Turkish government on migration. Finally, the tension is damaging German interests in Turkey and creates some discomfort in Germany, where a sizeable Turkish minority lives.

## A long-term solution

Turkey will back down. French military support to Greece has restored some balance of power. Turkey finds itself in an economic emergency and diplomatic isolation. However, beyond the current crisis, France and the European Union have no interest in alienating Turkey. Beside military support to Greece, France should have kept the channels of negotiation wide open with Turkey from the beginning, and it should continue to do so. A long-term solution requires settling maritime borders between Greece and Turkey. The European interest is to fix those borders as closely as possible to the guidelines in the **Montego Bay Convention**. To get Turkey to accept it, the EU could propose an agreement that would recognise an extensive right of establishment to the firms from both parties, like what exists within the EU and encompassing maritime areas. This compromise would mean that Turkish companies could, in principle, exploit resources in the EU, and, likewise, EU companies could receive authorisation to exploit resources in Turkey.