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# Imagined Enemies: The Aegean Conflict

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**ABSTRACT** *The Aegean conflict is the main bilateral bone of contention between Greece and Turkey. The paper presents the little-known two instances of meaningful Greek–Turkish talks on the Aegean (in 1975–81 and 2002–3) highlighting points of convergence. The parameters of a settlement are obvious yet the conflict remains in place after 40 years, not permitting Greek–Turkish reconciliation. The main reason for the impasse is that behind the tangible interests at stake lie mutual fears and mistrust as to the intentions of the other party in the Aegean. This is but the tip of the iceberg of what is a deeply engrained antagonism founded on historical memories, real or imagined, that depict the ‘Other’ as the implacable enemy.*

## Introduction

The Greek–Turkish Aegean conflict now at the end of its fourth decade (it started in 1973–74) is the main bone of contention between Greece and Turkey. The wider Greek–Turkish conflict also includes the Cyprus problem, issues related to their respective minorities and questions related to the Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul. In 1999 there was an unexpected thaw in Greek–Turkish relations which in view of the previous cold war between them, was regarded as akin to a rapprochement. With détente well in place, exploratory talks began on the Aegean in March 2002 and they have been going on ever since. Yet a decade of continuous deliberations has not yielded any concrete result.

The Aegean conflict is comprised of six main disputes: the delimitation of the Aegean continental shelf (on the basis of the international law of the sea, in instances of opposite or adjacent states with a common sea, delimitation is necessary, be it by agreement or adjudication); (2) the breadth of the Greek territorial sea (it has been six miles since 1936 but Greece has now and again stated that it intends to avail itself of the relevant article of the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea and extend it to 12 miles); (3) the breadth of the Greek national airspace (which is ten miles instead

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of six, a unique case of incongruity worldwide); (4) the international demilitarization status of those eastern Greek islands which are very close to Turkey (Greece has militarized these islands for fear of the ‘Turkish threat’); (5) the sovereignty of the Imia/Kardak islets and the ‘grey zones’ issue raised by Turkey (which claimed in 1996 that there are some 100 rocks and islets in the Aegean Sea whose ownership is ‘undetermined’); and (6) the rights and obligations related to the Athens Flight Information Region (FIR), mainly the issue of obtaining the flight plans of Turkish military aircraft overflying the Aegean, which is under the air control of ‘Athinai FIR’ (see in particular: Wilson, 1979/80; Couloumbis, 1983: 117–23; Pazarcı, 1988; Rozakis, 1988; Theodoropoulos, 1988: 266–300; S. Bölükbaşı, 1992: 33–45, 49; Gürel, 1993b: 161–90; Aydın, 1997: 115–22; Syrigos, 1998; Acer, 2003; D. Bölükbaşı, 2004; Heraclides, 2010: 167–219). The first three items, which are the most important ones, had initially come to the fore due to developments in the law of the sea, namely that inhabited islands (and not only continental territories) are entitled to a continental shelf, that the territorial sea can be up to 12 miles and that the airspace and the territorial sea should be aligned.

The Aegean controversy has produced three crises on the brink of war, one per decade: the August 1976 crisis, triggered by the voyage of the Turkish oceanographic vessel *Sismik I*; the March 1987 crisis, prompted by the possibility of oil extraction beyond Greece’s six mile territorial waters near the island of Thasos; and the February 1996 Imia/Kardak islets crisis, with the two parties coming closer to blows than ever before – a conflict that would have involved, in all probability, a major clash of the two navies. The 2000s were the only decade with no major crisis but the two sides are far from relaxed, with Greece not having abandoned the idea (since 1982) to extend the territorial seas to 12 miles and Turkey not having abandoned its *casus belli* threat should Greece dare such an extension.

The conflict in question is a constant source of tension and a very heavy drain on the economy of the two countries, given the considerable arms procurements (almost amounting to an arms race) and costly flights and dogfights between military aircraft on a regular basis, with the occasional airplane crash. Greece in particular is one of ‘the most militarized countries in NATO and the EU’ (Kollias, 2005: 99), with 4.6 per cent of GDP for defence expenditures in the period 1988–2000. In 2003 Greece reached its peak of 4.91 per cent (ranked 22nd in the world) and from 2005 until 2010 it was 4.30 per cent of GDP (ranked 20th to 26th in the world). This ‘anomaly’ for a peaceful country is almost exclusively due to the perceived ‘Turkish threat’. Turkey has also spent a huge amount of its GDP on defence from 1989 onwards, slightly less than Greece as a percentage of GDP from 1990 until 2003 but between 2004 and 2010 rising to as much as 5.3 per cent of GNP (ranked 15th to 17th in the world), though obviously the ‘Greek threat’ is not the only reason for this trend (Sezgin & Yildirim, 2002).<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the Aegean problem is a constant irritant for NATO and in the last dozen years it has become a factor in the EU–Turkey equation as well, as seen by the 1999 EU Helsinki Summit decision, which stipulates that Turkey, as a new candidate state, should ‘make every effort to resolve any outstanding border disputes [read the Aegean differences] and other related issues’ (Helsinki European Council

Presidency Conclusions, 10–11 December 1999). More generally, the resolution of the Aegean conflict and an overall reconciliation would reinforce Turkey's suitability to join the EU as a full member state

This article begins by presenting three strands of thought in the attempt to manage and settle the Aegean conflict, and pursues in great detail the third path, that is trying to settle the Aegean disputes. It will present the main exchanges and talks that have taken place between the two parties in the search for a settlement (in 1976–81 and in 2002–3), indicating points of divergence and convergence. Then it will set out the basic parameters of a logical and fair solution regarding the Aegean that are by and large more than obvious since the late 1970s. Yet the conflict persists not so much due to the incompatibility of concerns over tangible goals and interests (though the conflict tends to be defined in zero-sum terms) but due to the subjective dimension: the deeply ingrained fears, mistrust and threat perceptions. These are the real reasons for the non-resolution of the Aegean conflict and can be divided into two kinds, (a) those that refer to the Aegean *per se* and (b) those that are deeper and involve chosen historical memories and above all their respective collective identities which are based on belittling and demonizing the 'Other'.

### **Three Strands of Thought**

There are three strands of thought among pundits and decision makers in the two countries regarding the business of trying to manage or settle the Aegean conflict.

One approach is to give priority to the settlement of the Cyprus problem, a view until 2002 more popular in Greece than in Turkey. The obvious drawback of prioritizing the settlement of the Cyprus question is that it not very likely to be resolved in the foreseeable future. Hence it is unrealistic to place the resolution of the Cyprus problem prior to or in tandem with the resolution of the Aegean conflict. Consequently, Greece and Turkey should try to resolve their outstanding differences independently of the vicissitudes of the Cyprus quagmire. Greek–Turkish relations should not remain a hostage to the frustrating Cyprus problem. The bilateral Greek–Turkish differences, notably the Aegean differences, should be decoupled from the Cyprus quagmire. Hopefully the accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the EU has eased somewhat the pressure on Greece to extend unconditional support for the Greek-Cypriots.<sup>2</sup>

A second path is low politics, above all economic co-operation, extended contacts, tourism and the like (Haass, 1990: 63–4; Birand, 1991: 28–9; Hale, 2002: 66–7, 178–9). Hopefully after decades of enhanced co-operation that would lead to mutual trust, the Aegean dispute and the other outstanding bilateral differences may become 'desecuritized' and more amenable to a settlement (Rumelili, 2007: 107). Critics of this approach point out that it is too optimistic to regard economic co-operation and other transactions à la Mitrany potent enough to be able to withstand a downward spiral in Greek–Turkish relations. Economic co-operation, though impressive, is still in its early stages and not without difficulties (Evin, 2005: 15–17; Öniş & Yılmaz, 2008: 125, 131–34; Papadopoulos, 2009: 289–314).

A third avenue would be taking the bull by the horns as it were and trying to settle the Aegean dispute, as in 1975–81, in 2002–3 and apparently from May 2010 onwards.

Clearly the settlement of the Aegean dispute is long overdue and would be to the benefit of both Greece and Turkey and their neighbours and allies, reinforcing peace and security in the region. Let us thus elaborate on this straightforward third avenue.

### Talks Aimed at a Settlement

#### *Initial Hurdles*

The domestic factor aside (not to be seen as giving in on vital national interests), initiating a process of meaningful talks on the Aegean has run into two main difficulties: one is substantive and the other procedural.

As regards substance, a fundamental problem is that any logical and fair deal entails compromises difficult to swallow. For Greece these include the following: (a) the Greek national airspace has to be reduced from ten miles to the six miles of territorial waters (this is bound to be seen by as an intolerable reduction of Greece's sovereignty and not as a necessity on the basis of international law); (b) the territorial sea has to remain as it is (six miles) with any extension limited and to be acceptable to Ankara (this will be seen as abandoning a right by international law and throwing away a precious legal advantage); (c) so-called 'special' and 'relevant circumstances' (mainly the islands) will inevitably be taken into consideration in any delimitation,<sup>3</sup> as has been the case with all other instances of delimitation by adjudication (acknowledged by Karamanlis in his meeting with Ecevit in March 1978, in Karamanlis, 1992–97: vol. 10, 138); (d) the continental shelf would undoubtedly be split between Greece and Turkey at a ratio of 75:25 per cent to 70:30 per cent,<sup>4</sup> with even the first percentage very difficult to accept for most Greeks (politicians and public), who tend to misperceive the relevant provisions of law of the sea (Heraclides, 2010: 96–7, 117, 154–5) and regard Greece as a quintessentially Aegean country (Sofos & Özkırımlı, 2009: 29; see also Wilson, 1979/80: 3, 29); (e) the need to abide by the FIR rules and regulations as understood by ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organization) and not abuse its responsibilities as if they are sovereign rights; and (f) perhaps scaling down the militarization of the eastern Greek islands on a reciprocal basis with Turkey.

The difficulties on the Turkish side include the following: (a) having to accept a partial extension of Greek territorial waters in some cases, in view of the relevant stipulation in the 1982 Convention of the Law of the Sea which permits states to extend their territorial sea up to 12 miles; (b) acknowledging that the islands are also entitled to a full continental shelf (save those on the wrong side of the median line between the two mainlands) and that they cannot be ignored; (c) putting aside the 'grey zones' issue, which is anathema to Greece;<sup>5</sup> (d) perhaps allowing for the lapse of the demilitarization regime so as to meet Greece's 'security concerns' (as informally accepted by Ecevit in the cause of resolving the Aegean dispute, see Heraclides, 2010: 106) or doing away with its Fourth Army based in Izmir on a reciprocal basis with Greece (scrapping militarization); and (e) perhaps providing flight plans to Athinai FIR purely for reasons of security of aviation. On the whole, however, Turkey, which is unhappy with the status quo in the Aegean and is the

*demandeur* on the Aegean issue, is more attuned to mutual concessions than Greece (Birand, 1979: 105, 108, 267–9; Bahcheli, 1990: 128–9; Gürel, 1993a: 66).

As to procedure, the solution can be sought mainly by adjudication and/or negotiations (with perhaps facilitation rather than mediation as an auxiliary device). This has led to a ‘procedural dispute’ (Rozakis, 1997: 95). Greece favours recourse to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) with regard to the delimitation of the continental shelf and often acts as if the other issues are non-existent and simply preposterous Turkish claims.<sup>6</sup> Turkey favours negotiations on all the Aegean issues and regards the Greek *à la carte* approach of ‘only one difference and one solution’ as unacceptable (Gündüz, 2001: 99).<sup>7</sup>

Greek experts, with hardly any exception, are convinced that negotiations on the continental shelf dispute would be harmful to Greece.<sup>8</sup> The Turkish preference for negotiations reinforces this Greek belief. Presumably Turkey, with the law against it, hedges its bets on negotiations in the hope of wielding its greater power (geopolitical, military and otherwise) to its advantage. Turkey for its part is impressed by the Greek insistence on adjudication and jumps to the conclusion that the Greeks must know what they are doing; that the international law of the sea is indeed decidedly on the Greek side. In the last two decades Turkish experts have not failed to notice that most adjudications favour their view, for instance as regards offshore islands (as special or relevant circumstances) that are given half effect, less or no continental shelf at all and that the facade of coastline is given due consideration. But most Turks in key positions remain uneasy with adjudication, mainly due to the unpredictability of court decisions (Soysal, 1989: 51; Karaosmanoğlu, 1989: 24). Above all, Turkey remains suspicious of the ICJ because it feels that it will not do its job properly. It would probably favour Greece, which has a better international reputation than Turkey (Marsh, 1989: 231–2).

Dispute these drawbacks, meaningful talks have taken place and, with the exception of the talks of 2004–9, they were not talks for talks’ sake, with no resolution in mind.

### *The 1975–81 Talks*

The various talks of 1975–81 were put on course by the Brussels meeting of premiers Constantine Karamanlis and Suleyman Demirel (March 1975), the UN Security Council resolution that followed the August 1976 *Sismik* crisis and the Montreux meeting between premiers Karamanlis and Ecevit (March 1978).

These little-known talks took place from June 1975 until September 1981 in four distinct settings: (1) talks at experts’ level (headed by ambassadors) on airspace (mainly the FIR) and on the continental shelf, from June and September 1975 respectively, that continued on and off until 1981; (2) the summit talks of Karamanlis and Ecevit at Montreux (11–12 March 1978); (3) talks at the level of secretary-generals (ambassadors) of the two foreign ministries (July 1978–September 1981); and (4) three informal discussions between premier Ecevit and the former Greek ambassador in Ankara (October 1978–February 1979) (Heraclides, 2010: 86–90, 95–107).

Karamanlis and Demirel met in Brussels (31 May 1975) for two hours. The Greek leader tried to convince his Turkish counterpart that it was in the interests of both parties to refer the matter to the ICJ. Karamanlis conceded that on the other matters regarding the Aegean there were to be negotiations (something not accepted by Athens until then); as for the continental shelf, following the joint submission to the ICJ there could be parallel bilateral attempts to resolve the issue and, should they be successful before the court decision, the outcome could be submitted to the ICJ for approval. Demirel chose to go ahead, rejecting contrary advice by the Turkish experts. The joint Brussels Communiqué underlines the need to create a good atmosphere in their relations, whose amelioration is to the benefit of both countries; the outstanding problems are to be resolved through negotiations and for the matter of the continental shelf is to be settled by recourse to the ICJ (Birand, 1979: 116–21; Bitsios, 1983: 74; Karamanlis, 1992–97: vol. 8, 420–23).

The July 1976 crisis triggered by the voyage of *Sismik I* prompted Karamanlis to resort simultaneously to the UN Security Council and the ICJ, trying unsuccessfully, as it turned out, to draw a reluctant Turkey into an adjudication procedure.

Reacting to the Greek appeal, the Security Council adopted Resolution 395 (25 August 1976), which stated that the dispute should be resolved peacefully, through ‘direct negotiations’ leading to ‘mutually acceptable solutions’, but also referred to ‘appropriate judicial means’, in particular the ICJ, as an appropriate forum for settling the dispute (Gross, 1977: 48–54; Wilson, 1979/80: 9). Following Resolution 395 the talks on the continental shelf and on airspace were resumed (they had been suspended due to the crisis). The talks on the continental shelf were soon to lead to an agreement of a procedural character, at the Bern meeting of experts (11 November 1976).

The Bern Agreement was signed by the two experts of the continental shelf talks, ambassadors Ioannis Tzounis and M. Suat Bilge. Greece has from 1981 onwards tried to diminish the significance of the Bern Agreement and seems to regard it as dead letter. In fact the Bern Agreement amounts to an agreement under international law and apparently has not lapsed (Syrigos, 1998: 142). The main points of the agreement are that the negotiations would be secret with no leaks to the press, unless otherwise decided by consent; ‘to abstain from any initiative or act relating to the continental shelf of the Aegean Sea that might prejudice the negotiations’; ‘to abstain from any initiative or act which would tend to discredit the other party’; and to study state practice and international rules with a view ‘to educating certain principles and practical criteria’ of use in the delimitation of the Aegean continental shelf (Syrigos, 1998: 142; D. Bölükbaşı, 2004: 286). It has been claimed that a secret annex was attached to the agreement, to the effect that if agreement on the delimitation of the continental shelf were reached, the two sides would then jointly submit it to the ICJ for endorsement (D. Bölükbaşı, 2004: 286–7). The existence of such an annex is not implausible, in view of what Karamanlis had proposed to Demirel in their Brussels meeting.

The two-day Montreux summit meeting (11–12 March 1978) was the first and almost certainly the last time that the two parties, at the highest level, discussed frankly and in detail the Aegean conflict as a whole (for the Montreux meeting see

Karamanlis, 1992–97: vol. 10, 133–41; for a summary in English see Heraclides, 2010: 95–8).

Karamanlis started by stating that his government was content with the status quo in the Aegean but did not regard the Aegean as a ‘Greek sea’. Ecevit was quick to point out that Greece was acting as if its aim was a step-by-step expansion in the Aegean, which caused Turkey an acute sense of ‘claustrophobia in the Aegean’. On the continental shelf, Karamanlis stressed recourse to the ICJ. A court procedure, he argued, would absolve the two governments of any responsibility as to the outcome, and spare them the clamour of the opposition (that a sell-out was afoot), which would be difficult to avoid in any negotiated settlement. Ecevit was not completely opposed to joint recourse to the ICJ, but pointed out that if the ICJ were seen as the real destination there would be no serious attempts to arrive at a settlement in the course of the talks. Karamanlis acknowledged something that is regarded as a taboo in Greece: that the Geneva UN Convention on the Continental Shelf (1958) did include ‘special circumstances’ in delimitations of continental shelves and that if special circumstances were not taken into consideration in the Aegean, the outcome would be ‘unjust for Turkey’. Ecevit said that he was aware of the Greek fear that the ‘enclaving’ of the eastern Greek islands by Turkish continental shelf might lead to their sovereignty being put into question. He thus proposed that Turkey should give clear assurances that Greek sovereignty will not be threatened in any way; and Greece reciprocate by stating that it has no intention of expanding its territorial sea to 12 miles. Karamanlis retorted that the two undertakings were not comparable. Greek sovereignty over these islands was undisputed, so the Turks were offering nothing of substance by stating the obvious, while abandoning the prospect of the 12 miles would amount to formally abandoning Greece’s existing legal rights (though he stated on two occasions that Greece had no intention of extending its territorial waters).

On the thorny problem of the Greek national airspace of ten miles, the Turkish leader pointed out that it was contrary to international law and gave the impression that it was a stepping-stone for an extension of the territorial waters. The Greek leader, apparently aware that this is Greece’s weakest point, feigned lack of detailed knowledge, but added that this regime had been accepted by Turkey when it was introduced back in 1931. Regarding the issue of demilitarization, Karamanlis asserted that the militarization was purely for defensive purposes. The FIR question was also broached.

The secretary-generals’ talks held their first meeting in Ankara (4–5 July 1978) and their last meeting in Athens (8 September 1981). The talks were *ad referendum* (they were not binding and any common ground had to seek approval at high level), with no publicity. From July 1978 until September 1981 some 14 meetings were held, eight of them scheduled, alternating between Ankara and Athens, and six of them *ad hoc* at six different venues (Geneva, Strasbourg, London, Vienna, New York and Ankara). In the course of the talks all the Aegean issues were touched upon, in what was a frank and revealing discussion. The central theme remained the continental shelf. The Greek side favoured a step-by-step approach, starting with the more manageable issues (such as FIR). The Turkish side preferred a parallel package



deal approach, so as to be able to take stock of one's gains and losses as they were moving along.<sup>9</sup>

The informal meetings between Ecevit and the ex-ambassador to Ankara, Dimitris Kosmadopoulos, provide us with poignant imagery of the substance of the conflict. According to Ecevit, 'a double-edged Damoclean sword' looms over the two countries and their peoples. The Turks live with 'the nightmare of being strangled if Greece extends its territorial waters', the spectre of the 'Greek lake', which leads to 'a crisis of claustrophobia'. As for the Greeks, they perceive 'a neo-Ottoman expansionism that threatens their sovereignty in the islands', which leads them to a 'psychosis that the islands will be snatched', hence the fortification of the islands ('Kosmadopoulos report to the Prime Minister', dated 25 October 1978, in Karamanlis, 1992–97: vol. 10, 381).

From the talks of the years 1975–81 one can glean the following tentative principles and points of emerging convergence between the two parties (Heraclides, 2007: 109–11; 2010: 108):

- On the continental shelf, recourse to the ICJ is probably the ultimate course to follow, but first substantial negotiations should take place that might settle the question as a whole or in part.
- The Turkish continental shelf should not interpose (enclave) Greek islands.
- The Greek continental shelf should not cover all of the Aegean eastwards, blocking the existing openings of Turkey into the open sea of the Aegean.
- The Greek islands from the mid-Aegean eastwards should have less than full effect, contrary to the mainland and islands to the west.
- The need to take into consideration the 'special circumstances' prevailing in the Aegean Sea in order to arrive at a just ('equitable') solution on the continental shelf.
- Greece will not unilaterally expand its territorial waters to 12 miles. Athens cannot officially and publicly abandon such a right, but this could perhaps be the case in the endgame, following an overall agreement on the Aegean conflict.
- Solutions in the Aegean should satisfy both sides, with due consideration to the fears and needs of each side.
- Freedom of navigation in the Aegean Sea will not be impaired in any way.
- FIR responsibilities in no way imply sovereign rights for Greece; flight plans from military aircraft are needed only for the safety of civil aviation.
- 'Athinai FIR' will collaborate with 'Istanbul FIR' and will not unilaterally set up large corridors or otherwise curtail the airspace of the Aegean.
- Exclusive Economic Zones will not be sought by the two states in the Aegean Sea.

The 1976–81 talks did not succeed in settling the conflict as more time was needed to iron their differences (Bilge, 1989a: 9; Huliaras, 1989: 80<sup>10</sup>) and public opinion in both countries, still feeling the sting of the dramatic Cyprus crisis of the summer of 1974, was against a settlement, all too ready to cry that a sell-out was afoot. In any event the talks ended abruptly with the advent of Andreas Papandreou

(PASOK party) to power, which played havoc with Greek–Turkish relations (Huliaras, 1989: 79–89, 95–6; Bahcheli, 1990: 153–4; Clogg, 1991: 18).

*The 2002–3 Talks and their Aftermath*

Official Greek–Turkish talks on the Aegean started at the beginning of 2002. These talks would have been very difficult to bring about or move forward had there not been previous groundwork in two venues. One that has seen the light of day is the Greek–Turkish Forum (GTF), strictly speaking a process of ‘Track-2 diplomacy’, from 1998 until 2000. The other deliberation was official (‘Track-1 diplomacy’) but informal and took place secretly (following the December 1999 EU Helsinki decision on resolving border disputes) so as to clear the ground for the eventual talks. Nothing has come to light about this second recourse but it was apparently successful in its task of clearing the ground for future talks.<sup>11</sup>

The GTF (set up in 1997 at a Wilton Park meeting) was no mere NGO striving to ameliorate Greek–Turkish relations. The Turkish side included a former foreign minister, several senior retired ambassadors and a retired admiral, who was an adviser to premier Mesut Yılmaz. The Greek side included a senior retired ambassador and senior Greek academics well known for their close links with the Greek foreign ministry, including initially an academic who was the closest advisor on foreign affairs to the Greek premier Costas Simitis (given its participants and its function, George Papandreou is known to have called the GTF ‘Track-one-and-a-half diplomacy’).

The main achievement of the GTF was a document entitled ‘Issues in the Aegean: Openings and Possibilities’ that refers to four topics: delimitation of the continental shelf, territorial waters, airspace and ‘the disputed interpretation of treaty restrictions on the militarisation of certain Greek islands’. Emphasis was put on resolving the continental shelf issue by way of a two-stage process: (1) ‘negotiation, of a predetermined duration, which may lead either to an agreement on some or all substantive issues’ and (2) ‘submission of any remaining issues to the ICJ through a *compromis*’. As for territorial waters and airspace, they ‘might be approached incidentally to the main issue [the continental shelf], at either stage of the process, as primarily problems of interpreting treaties and precedent’. Freedom of navigation as well as the exploitation of sea resources was to be ensured. As for the demilitarization thorn, the suggestion was that it be left until last, in the hope that once the other Aegean issues were settled ‘the salience of this issue would decline sharply’ (Özel, 1994: 286–9).

Apparently what did the trick at the GTF, making such a distinguished group of semi-official Turks and Greeks agree on a text on the sensitive Aegean conflict, was the clear indication by the Greek side that Greece ‘could live’ without extending its territorial waters to 12 miles.<sup>12</sup>

Official talks on the Aegean started at the beginning of 2002, following a decision by foreign ministers George Papandreou and Ismail Cem (February 2002). The talks commenced on 12 March 2002, at experts’ level, with two representatives on either side and with meetings alternating between Athens and Ankara. The talks did not pick up immediately due to the switch of Turkish foreign ministers from Cem to

the hawkish Şükrü Sina Gürel. In November 2002, following the electoral victory of the AKP (Justice and Development Party), the pace was slow due to the inexperience of the new government and the priority given to the opening of entry negotiations with the EU and to the Iraq crisis with its haunting Kurdish dimension (Ayman, 2004: 235). Yet by spring 2003 the deliberations gained momentum and by the end of the year the two sides seemed very close to an agreement on procedure as well as substance. But the deal was not clinched due to the forthcoming elections in Greece in February 2004, with premier Costas Simitis wary lest an Aegean deal should become an electoral liability (Simitis, 2005: 104).

In the 2003 talks the two parties were serious in their dealings. Greece was not dragging its feet so as to draw a reluctant Turkey into the ICJ (the EU Helsinki Summit decision of December 1999 was equipped with a sunset clause, to the effect that if agreement was not reached by the end of 2004 there would be recourse to the ICJ). Turkey for its part was not opposed to resorting to the ICJ for the continental shelf provided the territorial sea and airspace issues were satisfactorily resolved beforehand (after all, for the delimitation of the continental shelf a fixed breadth of territorial waters is a prerequisite). Greece tried to get through an extension to ten miles and in this way harmonize its territorial waters with its airspace. Turkey was adamantly opposed to the ten miles idea, but seemed prepared to discuss the possibility of some extension in some areas, such as in the Greek mainland and some western islands, provided there was no closure of the high seas from the Straits to the wider Mediterranean Sea. In the end it was agreed that a joint statement would be issued regarding the start of official negotiations on the Aegean conflict and that wherever agreement could not be reached there would be recourse to the ICJ, but this statement was never issued (Heraclides, 2010: 153–4).<sup>13</sup>

In both the GTF deliberations and in the official preliminary contacts one sees what I would call a ‘small package’ approach to the Aegean conflict, or ‘quick fix’: appearing to focus mainly on the continental shelf question but by the same token also addressing territorial waters and airspace, since all three are inter-related. In this context demilitarization and the ‘grey zones’ are left out, either for later or in the hope that they would become less salient once the three big issues are resolved. Undoubtedly this is the closest that the two parties have ever come to a deal on the Aegean and it is almost certain that had it not been for the Greek change of government, the resolution of the Aegean dispute would have been put on course, with traditional negotiations as well as adjudication. As we have seen, in the period 1978–81 and in the GTF, there was movement and a constructive spirit precisely because Greece indicated that it fully understood Turkey’s concern with the 12-mile limit and had no intention of extending its territorial sea unilaterally.

The talks technically continued, though they were put on ice by the New Democracy party that had come to power in Greece (March 2004). It was unfavourable to any Aegean deal with Turkey and even against recourse to adjudication regarding the continental shelf, the standard Greek position since 1975 (see the views presented beforehand by the then foreign minister Moliviatis, 2000: 75).

From May 2010 onwards meaningful talks on the Aegean dispute have been resumed. The Erdoğan government seems prepared to clinch a deal, but Greece

under George Papandreou prefers a more drawn-out process due to fear of the domestic cost, so as to have ample time to prepare the Greek public for the eventual compromise. The fact that Turkey's EU prospect as a 'carrot' is fading, and EU membership is less popular in Turkey, is not helpful. Moreover, Greece's economic woes (it has been on the brink of bankruptcy since 2009) do not permit bold conciliatory steps on the Aegean, since the opposition and the public are bound to regard it a sell-out to Turkey given Greece's present weakness.

### **Resolving the Aegean Conflict**

#### *The Objective Dimension: Splitting the Difference*

The obvious goal is to address the Aegean issues with a view to arriving at a mutually acceptable settlement that will resolve the dispute comprehensively once and for all. Despite the well-known entrenched positions of the two sides for decades, there are clear points of convergence, as seen in the talks of 1978–81 and 2002–3, provided both sides are willing to show moderation and a constructive spirit. Needless to say, there is a need for a strong, resolute and moderate government on either side willing to settle the Aegean differences and embark on a historical compromise with the 'enemy', as in the period 1930–39.

Procedurally, there are four possibilities: (a) an overall package deal, as implied in the talks of 1975–81 and favoured mainly by Turkey; (b) a 'step by step' approach, from the easier matters to the sticking points, an approach favoured by Greece; (c) a small package, as seen in the 2002–3 talks; and (d) a mixed approach, as seems to be the case in the more recent reinvigorated talks (May 2010 onwards).

In any sincere and open negotiation the main focus would be on tangible interests: sovereign rights, national security, oil, commerce, freedom of the seas, access to islands and ports, the indivisibility of national territory and so on. The aim would be to pinpoint manageable, negotiable issues, to be placed within a cost–benefit calculus. The final outcome would be of the 'split the difference' kind, in which both sides make commensurate concessions. In the years to come this 'fixed-sum' line may become 'positive-sum' in view of the beneficial effects to Greek–Turkish relations that will accrue from the resolution of the Aegean conflict.

The outcome of such a peace process is fairly clear-cut. Regarding the continental shelf, they can leave the matter unresolved *sine die*, by freezing delimitation and explorations for oil; or they can seek delimitation by adjudication or negotiations. In any delimitation the end result would be anything between 25 and 30 per cent of the continental shelf (underneath the open seas) going to Turkey and 70 to 75 per cent to Greece, with perhaps joint exploitation in some regions, which Turkey traditionally favours.

On the territorial waters they could abide by the six miles or resort to partial extension by Greece in some areas but not in others, for instance 12 miles regarding the two mainland territories and six in the islands or eight in the westward islands, following an agreement between the two parties. Clearly the simplest solution is to abide by the six miles, which will have a positive spill-over effect on the other Aegean issues and on Greek–Turkish relations as a whole.

On national airspace, the Greek airspace has to tally with the territorial waters and not the other way round, limiting itself to six miles or to any other breadth decided by the two parties for the territorial sea.

As for demilitarization, it could ‘take care of itself’ (Wilson, 1979/80: 28) once settlement has been reached on the three main issues. At the very least a phased disengagement or balanced forced reduction regarding both the eastern Greek islands and the Turkish coast (Turkish 4th Army and large flotilla of landing craft in the Izmir region) could do the trick.

The Imia/Kardak issue and other ‘grey zones’ should either disappear from the agenda if the previous issues are resolved or alternatively lead to negotiated settlement regarding the maritime boundaries that are not clearly demarcated, that is north of the region of the Dodecanese islands up to the Evros/Meriç river territorial border in Thrace.

The FIR dispute would probably fall into place once the other issues are resolved, not least the national airspace question. Under the circumstances, flight plans could perhaps be provided to ‘Athina FIR’ purely for reasons of aviation safety, with no abuse of responsibility on the part of Athens.

Clearly the dispute is resolvable with logical and reciprocal concessions on either side which are not that difficult to swallow. Yet the Aegean dispute persists, as does the wider Greek–Turkish conflict, with not even one item in their extended agenda having been resolved despite some 12 years of détente. Social inertia apart, the Aegean conflict continues to be seen in ‘win–lose’ terms, with the two sides acting accordingly and thus confirming the worst fears of the other party. The ‘win–win’ element of a prospective resolution is not obvious, especially in Greece. Public opinion in Greece and Turkey is convinced to this day that the other side is not being truthful in its claims of being a status quo power. Opinion polls in both countries show that even after the earthquake spirit of 1999, more than 70 per cent regard the other as the enemy and as the main external threat most likely to attack them militarily (Çarkoğlu & Kirişci, 2005; Millas, 2005: 64–8).

But there is more to it. Three inter-related reasons have not permitted a settlement: (1) governmental fear of the domestic cost, namely the dread of being branded as selling out on ‘national issues’; (2) the exaggerated and totally unrealistic expectations of the two publics and even of some so-called ‘experts’ on either side (which misunderstand international law and the relevant stipulations of the law of the sea) regarding prospective gains in the Aegean, expectations kindled through the years by populist political leaders; and (3) the respective perceptions and fears regarding the real aims of the other side which may border on the paranoiac but are real enough: on the one hand the *Angst* that Turkey wants to take over half of the Aegean seabed, sea and airspace and even ‘grab’ eastern Greek islands; and the *Angst* that Greece is bent on turning the Aegean Sea into a ‘Greek lake’ and ‘suffocating’ Turkey, throwing it out of the Aegean. Behind all three reasons stands a fourth mega-reason: the depiction of the ‘Other’ as the implacable enemy which draws its conviction from real or imagined historical memories, buttressed by their respective national narratives coupled with their chosen collective identities.

*The Subjective Dimension: Addressing Fears and Needs*

The Aegean dispute is a complex conflict involving tangible interests, such as oil and other mineral resources, sovereign rights, sovereignty, access to the open sea and so on as well as sheer prestige. However these are not necessarily the main issues at stake (see in particular: Wilson, 1979/80: 1–2, 13, 27, 29; Clogg, 1983: 124–5, 128, 131; Couloumbis, 1983; Groom, 1986: 147–8, 152; Bahcheli, 1990: 129–30, 152–4, 192–3; Haass, 1990: 59–64; Stearns, 1992: 134–44). And this clash of interests is not the one that has made the conflict impervious to a settlement. What has made a settlement impossible from 1973 until today, despite the various promising talks, is the huge barrier created by mutual total lack of trust.

As we have said, the major entrenched fears concerning the Aegean are that it will be divided in half, splitting the Greek state; and the spectre of the ‘Greek lake’ that is seen as ‘strangling’ Turkey and throwing the country out of the Aegean, as if it was a land-locked state.

More generally, the Greeks (in the great majority) are convinced that from 1974 (Cyprus crisis) until today Turkey is in the throes of ‘neo-Ottomanism’ and expansionism: to ‘ensnare’ the eastern Greek islands, and even ‘grab’ Greek Thrace, if given the opportunity, or the whole of Cyprus.<sup>14</sup> The Turks for their part believe that Greece is experiencing a return to the irredentist *Megali Idea* (Great Idea) of the period 1850–1922 (whose avowed aim was to conquer as many Ottoman territories as possible), though Athens now treads more carefully, by using a legalistic strategy in the Aegean to render it a ‘Greek sea’ and by, inter alia, giving support to the PKK.<sup>15</sup>

Various principles such as the non-closure of Greek islands by the Turkish continental shelf or the non-closure of Turkey’s existing openings to the high seas (as discussed in the 1978–81 talks) would go a long way to addressing these deeply felt fears. On the Greek side, the key is to abandon once and for all the popular perception that the Aegean is a Greek sea or should become one (via the extension of the territorial sea to 10 or 12 miles); and on the Turkish side the tendency to ignore the islands, which is seen in Greece as suggesting that the eastern Aegean should have been – or should become – Turkish.

More specifically, for the Greek side, according to Theodore Couloumbis, ‘it must be made clear that the Aegean cannot be partitioned or subdivided in such a fashion that it *encloses* Greek territories such as the Dodecanese and eastern Aegean into a zone (or zones) of Turkish functional jurisdiction’ (Couloumbis & Klarevas, 1998: 130, emphasis original). And it should also be made crystal clear that recourse to the use of force in the Aegean is unthinkable and Turkey indeed harbours no expansionism whatsoever in the Aegean or elsewhere towards Greece (Theodoropoulos, 1988: 325; Tzounis, 1990: 217–18; Couloumbis & Klarevas, 1998: 129).

For the Turkish side, the Turkish–Greek Aegean relationship must be guided, according to Ahmet Evin, by ‘three cardinal principles: 1) the Aegean is a common sea between the two countries; 2) the freedom of the high seas, and that of the air space above it, should be respected in accordance with point 1; 3) any extension of territorial waters by any party should be based on mutual consent between the parties and should be implemented in a fair and equitable fashion’ (Evin, 2005: 10).

In fact both parties have officially claimed in the last 80 years (from 1929 onwards) and from 1973/74 (when the Aegean dispute started) onwards that they harbour no territorial ambitions whatsoever towards the territory of the other side. Both are – and regard themselves as – status quo states. Yet to no avail. The two parties in their great majority are absolutely convinced of the malign intentions of the other side.

### *The Rub*

Trying to settle the Aegean dispute has led to naught above all because the dispute in question is but the tip of the iceberg. The Aegean dispute has defied a settlement not only due to the mutual fears and lack of confidence as to the Aegean *per se*, but because there is ‘something deeper and far more difficult to dislodge, let alone address in a meaningful way: the weight of history weighing down on either side, and in particular imagined history, based on chosen glories and traumas’ (Heraclides, 2010: 223–4).

More specifically, in the Greek case the negative image of the Turks (as backward, barbarian and prone to committing atrocities) is an essential ingredient of the Greek self-image and identity. The Greek claim to be the direct descendants of the ‘the classics’ (the Ancient Greeks) makes Greece the ‘cradle of civilization’ and via the ancient Greek connection part of European civilization and culture. Hence there is the need to depict the Turks and their Ottoman ancestors as the very opposite (as ‘barbaric’, ‘undemocratic’ and backward’) so as to further highlight the modernity, progressiveness and democratic credentials of the Greeks (Yerasimos, 1988: 39–40; Pasmazoglou, 1993: 383; Gourgouris, 1996: 268; Tsoukalas, 1999).

The Turks return the Greek compliment regarding barbarity and backwardness, claiming that the Greeks have committed an array of atrocities since they ungratefully rebelled against their Ottoman benefactors in 1821 (Millas, 1991: 26–7; D. Bölükbaşı, 2004: 13, 22, 32, 45–6). Greek society is ultra-nationalist; the Greeks suffer from a deep-seated neurosis towards the Turks (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1994: 37–46, 181–3) and a pathological enmity (D. Bölükbaşı, 2004: 42). The Greek state is being run by the ‘backward Greek Church’ and its obscurantist priests (Berkes, 1984: 125–38), a church which is the ‘bastion of the ‘Megali Idea’ (the Greek irredentist drive of 1850–1922) still very much alive in Greece (D. Bölükbaşı, 2004: 42). Furthermore, the Turks experience what has been called the ‘Sèvres syndrome’ (Soysal, 2004: 41; Kirişçi, 2006: 32–8; Yılmaz, 2006), the fear of amputation and dismemberment of the motherland (derived from the 1920 Sèvres Treaty’s harsh and unfair carving up even of Anatolia proper), which is regarded even today as the hidden agenda of the Greeks, who have remained irredentists.

The Greek–Turkish antagonism is deep-rooted because the ‘imagined other’ as devious and threatening is a fundamental ingredient of one’s own collective identity *qua* nation. Demonization is indispensable for the respective national identities and sense of self-worth (Millas, 1991, 2004, 2005; Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1994: 1–12; Heraclides, 2001, 2010: 223–4, 231–3). A more likeable ‘Other’, worthy of recognition and respect, is difficult to accept for it puts into doubt the cherished but

insecure national identity and self-worth of the Greeks and Turks respectively, which is built to a large extent on belittling the 'Other' (Heraclides, 2004: 73). The rivalry seems to have positive functions along the Simmel–Coser postulate: external threat breeds internal cohesion. If the enemy is no more, the two states may find themselves with a host of insurmountable internal divisions and problems.

These are the *real reasons* why talks on settling the Aegean conflict have run aground despite the best of intentions. If this pessimistic assessment is correct, the prospects of the ongoing talks remain dim. Perhaps the only realistic option is crisis management and not resolution, at least for the foreseeable future. As regards the talks *per se*, the two parties have all along suffered from the 're-entry' (Burton, 1986: 198) or 'transfer' problem (Mitchell, 1981: 144–50) as it is known in the literature of conflict resolution: even when talks produce mutual confidence and considerable change in the attitudes of the negotiators involved, with agreement within reach, it does not materialize because the negotiators are unable to convince the leaders and publics which eye the new thinking and the emerging agreement with great suspicion and hostility.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The percentages given are based on SIPRI's *Military Expenditures Database* and the CIA's *The World Factbook, Country Comparison: Military Expenditures*.
- <sup>2</sup> Prior to 1999 the role of the EU in ameliorating Greek–Turkish relations was almost non-existent. For the positive role of the EU in Greek–Turkish relations in 1999 and in the first years of the 2000s see Rumelili (2004) and Tsakonias (2010).
- <sup>3</sup> Greece has consistently claimed in its official argumentation regarding the continental shelf that the islands do not constitute 'special' or 'relevant circumstances' (otherwise some of them may end up with limited continental shelf or none at all). Needless to say Turkey claims the very opposite. See for details and bibliography Heraclides (2010: 168–70, 172–4). The law of the sea and the decisions of the ICJ and of arbitrations are clear on the matter: islands together with the configuration of the two coasts are the most obvious special or relevant circumstances (see Churchill & Lowe, 1999: 187–91).
- <sup>4</sup> On the basis of discussions of the author with Greek and Turkish officials involved in the talks on the Aegean and with reputable international lawyers specializing on the continental shelf on the basis of non-attribution.
- <sup>5</sup> Greece regards this issue as an anathema for it sees it as the clearest case where the sovereignty of Greek 'national soil' is put into question. In Turkey there are three schools of thought on the matter: (1) that it was a major mistake on their part and should not have been raised at all for it did great damage to Greek–Turkish relations; (2) that it is there simply as a useful bargaining chip to be dropped later; and (3) that the question should remain in place as a basic item of the Aegean agenda for it is of considerable value for the delimitation of the continental shelf and for the territorial sea issue and after all the sea boundaries between Greece and Turkey have not been clearly demarcated. Based on discussions of the author with several Turkish academics and retired ambassadors as well as Greek officials and academics who took part in the Greek–Turkish dialogue of the 2000s.
- <sup>6</sup> As pointed out on the website of the Greek foreign ministry in the last decade, see 'Continental shelf' under 'Differences', Foreign Policy–Turkey. Available at <http://www.mfa.gr> (accessed repeatedly through the 2000s).



- <sup>7</sup> See also the website of the Turkish foreign ministry in the last decade, in 'Further Readings on the Aegean Issues', Foreign Policy–Greece. Available at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr> (accessed repeatedly through the 2000s).
- <sup>8</sup> See the writings of the senior Greek legal experts involved with the Aegean dispute. Constantin Economidès and Theodore Halkiopoulos (who had served as legal advisers to the Greek foreign ministry; also Krateros Ioannou; and among the moderates, Christos Rozakis).
- <sup>9</sup> See for details of the meetings Heraclides (2010: 98–105), based on the secret archives of the Greek foreign ministry (not open to the public), the published Karamanlis Archives (Karamanlis, 1992–97), the memoirs of ambassador Kâmuran Gürün (see Gürün, 1994, 1995) (the Turkish representative in the secretary-generals talks during 1980–81) and interviews of the author with the late ambassador Byron Theodoropoulos (the Greek representative in the secretary-generals talks during 1978–80).
- <sup>10</sup> Ambassador Ioannis Tzounis, personal interview to Asteris Huliaras, Thessaloniki, Greece, 5 March 1988 (referred to in Huliaras, 1989: 80).
- <sup>11</sup> Based on information gathered by the author on the basis of non-attribution.
- <sup>12</sup> Interviews of the author with two of the main GTF participants, retired ambassador Costas Zepos and former foreign minister Ilter Türkmen.
- <sup>13</sup> Based on news reports in the quality press and corroborating information found by the author.
- <sup>14</sup> All Greek specialists on Greek–Turkish relations (with very few exceptions, such as this author) regard Turkey as threatening and expansionist towards Greece, hard-liners and moderates alike. Among the hard-liners see Valinakis (1990); Platias (1991); Economidès (1993, 1997); Ioannou (1997); and Syrigos (1998). Among the moderates see Veremis (1982); Rozakis (1988); Tzounis (1990); Theodoropoulos et al. (1995: 49–70); Couloumbis (1999); Veremis and Couloumbis (1994); and Tsakonas (2010).
- <sup>15</sup> See for such views the writings of distinguished Turkish academics and diplomats, including Çağlayangil (2001[1990]: 237–9); Pacarzu (1986, 1988); Bilge (1989b, 2000); Gürkan (1989); Gürel (1993a, 1993b: 163–71); Elekdağ (1996); Inan and Baseren (1996: 60, 63); Gündüz (2001); Arun (2001: 20–23, 26); Acer (2003: 48–9, 61, 143); Soysal (2004); D. Bölükbaşı (2004: 15–35, 42–50, 62–72).

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