



Metis

Study

The Eastern Mediterranean security complex – escalation or improvement?

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Summary

The Eastern Mediterranean is the Achilles heel of the European Union (EU) and NATO. The political cohesion of the Western Alliance, Europe's autonomy on matters of security policy, and the EU's energy resilience are all put to the test in the region. This study focuses on the conflict between

Greece and Turkey in the Aegean Sea, which highlights the complexity of the security policy challenges facing the region. It identifies developments in the field of security policy and derives possible recommendations for action.

The geopolitical role of the Eastern Mediterranean

The Mediterranean serves as a natural as well as a political and cultural border between the European, African and Asian continents. It constitutes the external border of the EU and NATO countries and separates democracies from hybrid or authoritarian regimes, highly developed service economies from emerging countries with growing populations. From a security policy perspective too, the Mediterranean is a key geostrategic region for the EU. As an inland sea, it connects the Atlantic with the Indian Ocean and provides access to the Black Sea. Given its importance as a primary sea trade route from Asia to Europe and its significant natural resources, it is also an important source for Europe's future energy independence and economic development. With the Suez Canal, the Dardanelles, and its position as a crossroads between three continents, the Eastern Mediterranean is of particular importance. Since 2015, it has been the primary route for war refugees and migrants from Africa and Asia. Its geopolitical significance has further increased in light of Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022. The region plays a key role in the efforts of European countries to become less dependent on Russia for energy and to reduce their energy and economic vulnerability. The Eastern Mediterranean is also relevant to efforts to contain Russia's maritime activities through a strategy of anti-access/area denial. Taking the Aegean Sea and the unilateral conflict between Turkey and Greece as an example, this study will discuss how the systemic conflict between democracies and autocracies, the struggle for spheres of interest,

resources, regional hegemony, and hybrid threats dominate the region and thus threaten stability in Europe in the political, economic and security arena.

The Aegean Sea – the status quo

For several decades, diplomatic efforts have been unsuccessful at resolving the conflict in the Aegean Sea and thus paving the way for Turkey's accession to the EU. These efforts have failed mainly because of the complexity of the conflict, which consists of various overlapping territorial, airspace and maritime disputes. In addition, Turkey's position has changed several times since 1958, with more and more demands being made and new interpretations of existing treaties presented. The course of the border between Greece and Turkey is a result of the two Balkan wars (1912–1913) and the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1923). In response to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, a counter-government was formed in Ankara under Kemal Atatürk to reverse the territorial losses of the Treaty of Sèvres. The Greco-Turkish war ended with the foundation of the Republic of Turkey and the Lausanne Peace Treaty in 1923, which demarcates the current national borders. For the Aegean Sea, Article 12 of the Treaty stipulates that, with the exception of Tenedos (Bozcaada) and Imbros (Gökçeada), all islands located more than three nautical miles from the Turkish mainland are Greek territory. In order to keep the peace, Greece – in accordance with Article 13 – undertook not to set up any naval bases or fortifications on Lesbos, Chios, Samos or Icaria, not to fly over Turkish territory, and to



limit the number of armed forces on these islands. In return, the Treaty prohibits Turkey from flying over these Greek islands. With regard to the Southern Aegean Sea (Dodecanese), Article 15 stipulates that Turkey shall, for the benefit of Italy, renounce all rights and entitlements to the islands of Astypalaia, Rhodes, Calki, Karpathos, Kasos, Tilos, Nisyros, Kalymnos, Leros, Patmos, Leipsoi, Symi, Kos, and the islets dependent on them, as well as the island of Kastellorizo. Under the 1947 Paris Peace Treaties after World War II, the Dodecanese islands were transferred from Italy to Greece. In accordance with Article 14, Greece made a commitment to Italy and the

British Empire to demilitarise these islands. As part of the further codification of maritime law, the Convention on the Continental Shelf (CCS) was adopted in 1958 and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982. Both countries subsequently extended their territorial waters from three to six nautical miles.

Conflicting international law and political positions

The Turkish position focuses on a bilateral solution and emphasises the existing treaties yet favours a one-sided interpretation of certain articles. Although Turkey is not a party to either the CCS or the UNCLOS and rejects the

jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), its position on the delimitation of the continental shelf is based on the CCS, citing special circumstances in the deviation from the median line and ICJ rulings that apply this rule. Turkey argues that the Greek islands are located on the Turkish continental shelf. In defining the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), the Greek islands should therefore not be taken into account and the EEZ should be set up along the 25th median line in the middle of the Aegean Sea. Turkey also calls for the island of Kastellorizo (approximately 150 km east of Rhodes) to be outside the boundary, claiming that it is too small and too far from the mainland and that it blocks Turkey's access to the Eastern Mediterranean. What is more, Turkey regards as a *casus belli* the intention to extend Greek territorial waters from six to twelve nautical miles in accordance with the UNCLOS. This expansion would mean that the Greek Aegean comprises 71.5%, with Turkey only entitled to 8.8% and the remaining 19.7% still counting as international waters. This distribution would be unfair and Turkey is trying to prevent it. As Figure 2 shows, strict interpretation of the UNCLOS would mean that a Greek and Cypriot EEZ would significantly limit the Turkish EEZ in the Mediterranean.

For Turkey, several small islands along the Turkish coast and to the south of Crete are "grey areas" because sovereignty over them was not specifically transferred to Greece in 1923 and 1947. In 2006, Turkey also published the "Blue Homeland"

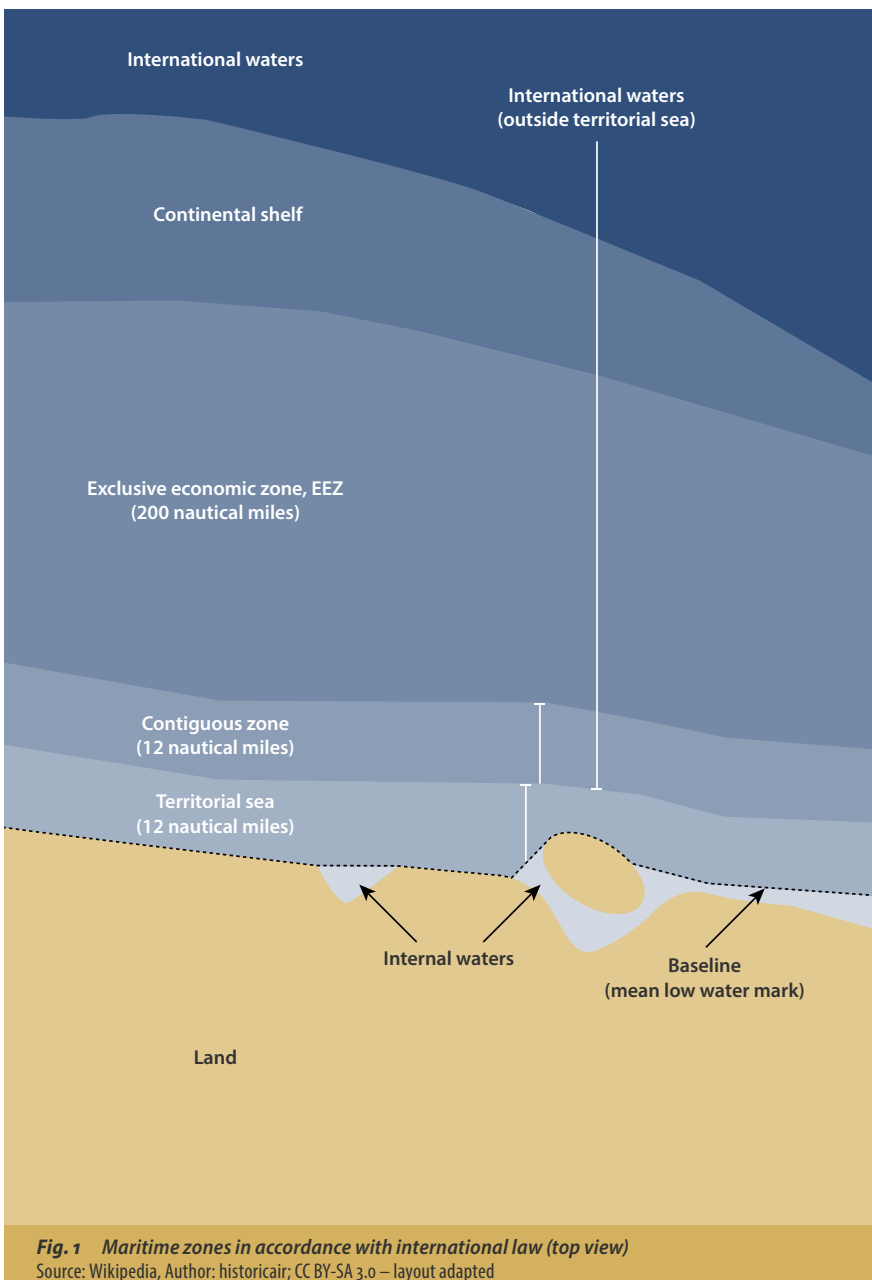


Fig. 1 Maritime zones in accordance with international law (top view)
Source: Wikipedia, Author: historicaire; CC BY-SA 3.0 – layout adapted



Fig. 2 EEZ of EU states in accordance with UNCLOS; EU member states and non-EU states bordering the Mediterranean Sea | Source: Author's own work

(*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine, which underscores its entitlement to a larger EEZ (see Fig. 3). Of particular importance in the doctrine is that the Greek islands are denied territorial

seas and EEZs because they are located on the Turkish continental shelf. In order to support the *Mavi Vatan* demands, Ankara signed a memorandum with the Libyan government in 2020 on the delimitation of maritime borders. This memorandum completely ignored the existence of large Greek islands such as Rhodes and Crete.

Furthermore, Turkey has disputed Greece's sovereignty of the eastern Greek Aegean islands since 2020 because it believes that these islands should be demilitarised in accordance with the Treaty of Lausanne and the Treaty of Paris, yet Greece maintains armed forces on them. From Ankara's point of view, sovereignty had only been transferred to Greece under the condition of demilitarisation, which now puts a question mark over that sovereignty. The Greek armed forces on the islands are also seen as an immediate threat to Turkey's west coast. Since



Fig. 3 "Blue Homeland" (*Mavi Vatan*). Turkish EEZ in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean Sea
Source: Wikipedia; Author: Cihat Yaycı; CC BY-SA 4.0



2020, these demands have escalated to open threats of war against Greece.

Greece, which is a party to both treaties, argues in accordance with CCS and UNCLOS that all inhabited islands are entitled to territorial seas and an EEZ. Invoking the Chicago Convention on Civil Aviation, Athens further claims a national airspace of ten nautical miles at present and thus generates a precedent in that its national airspace extends beyond its territorial seas by four nautical miles. This precedent is mainly a result of Turkey's threat of war if Greece were to extend its territorial seas in the Aegean Sea to twelve nautical miles. Athens is striving for an expansion, which it implemented in the Ionic Sea in 2021, and advocates the international principle of the equidistance median line for the delimitation of territorial waters and EEZ. Athens is also calling on Ankara to revoke the *casus belli* that has existed since 1996. In 2021, in response to the Turkish-Libyan memorandum, Greece demarcated its EEZ south of Crete and Rhodes with Egypt. Greece is seeking arbitration by the ICJ to resolve the conflict, but Ankara rejects this. With regard to Turkey's demand for the Eastern Aegean to be demilitarised, Athens points out that the limitations provided for by the Treaty of Lausanne are being complied with. It also claims that the 1936 Montreux Convention supersedes these limitations. The accusation that the limited units on the Greek islands constitute a threat to Turkey is rejected as a pretext for war. When it comes to the Dodecanese, which are subject to demilitarisation, Athens, in pointing out that Turkey is not a party to the Treaty of Paris, cites the doctrine of *res inter alios acta*, which holds that a contract cannot affect the rights of anyone not party to that contract. In addition, Athens relies on the right of self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter, since Turkish jets regularly fly over inhabited islands and Turkey maintains NATO's largest amphibious landing fleet in Izmir.

Intergovernmental militarised dispute and hybrid threats

The complex conflict over sovereignty and its relevance to islands, EEZs and continental shelves has been a burden on relations between Greece and Turkey since the 1970s. In combination with the Cyprus dispute, this is already a case of a frozen conflict. During the Sismik crisis in 1987 and again in 1996 with the Imia standoff, tensions already escalated to the extent that the two countries were on the brink of war. The conflict is evident in daily mock fights between combat aircraft, Turkish jets flying over inhabited and uninhabited islands, and collisions between coastguard ships. According to Greek reports submitted to NATO, thousands of violations of Greek airspace occur every year. Although some of them are the result of conflicting claims over airspace, a considerable share of these violations relates to Turkish jets being flown over inhabited Greek islands. Every year since 2019, Turkey

has been sending research vessels into the Greek EEZ to explore gas deposits. On several occasions, this has led to incidents between the navies of the two NATO states and even collisions between warships. Escalation could only be prevented thanks to the mediation efforts of Germany, France and the US. There are already plans to continue exploration in Greek waters by Turkish research vessels escorted by warships in 2022 and 2023. The number of Turkish or Turkish-owned ships suspected of human trafficking and arms smuggling is also on the increase. Several incidents involving Turkish ships trying to bypass the arms embargo against Libya but resisting inspection by the Greek coastguard have made headlines in recent years. In February 2020, Greece also accused Turkey of forcing the illegal border crossing of thousands of migrants as a means of hybrid warfare. Prior to that, the Turkish government had declared that the border with the EU was open. Migrants were then forced onto buses to transport them to the Greek-Turkish border. The crisis was only resolved thanks to the rapid response of the border guards and the first COVID-19 lockdown. In response, Athens built a wall along the border.

The rhetoric of the Erdoğan government towards Athens has also intensified since 2019. Almost every week, Ankara announces severe consequences, makes reference to the superiority of relative power distribution, or openly threatens to invade islands. Most importantly, Turkey is calling for the complete disarmament of the Eastern Aegean, accuses Greece of mistreating refugees, and believes that the Turkish minorities in Thrace are being oppressed. In these endeavours too, Turkey has recently been taking disinformation approaches similar to those used by Russia and has attempted to establish parallel narratives in order to discredit Greece and the EU. Since the imposition of US sanctions in response to the Turkish purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence system and outspoken criticism by several EU states of Turkey's aggressive foreign policy, Ankara has also described Athens as a puppet of Washington, Paris and Berlin. In its attempts to paint migrants in distress at sea and the practice of pushbacks as a sign of the lawlessness of the EU, Turkey also neglects to mention its own coastguard's practice of pushing migrants into Greek territory. Historical narratives of former Ottoman greatness are also exaggerated and often go hand in hand with demands for the West to negotiate on equal terms with Turkey and to show the country respect.

To date, Greece and the EU have largely demonstrated restraint in their response to Turkey's demands, provocations and border violations. The one-sided nature of this aggression and Turkey's renewed demands force Greece to take political, diplomatic and military countermeasures. Athens mainly focuses on Ankara's diplomatic isolation and on deterrence by concluding numerous bilateral defence cooperation agreements with EU countries, regional partners and key actors such as the US, Israel and

France. Greece tries to prevent Turkish arms imports from EU and NATO countries by flagging Turkey's aggression. Following Turkey's exclusion from the F-35 programme, Greece has been seeking to delay modernisation of the Turkish F-16 fleet, for example. Athens has also once again initiated huge armaments projects and has ordered new frigates as well as 4th- and 5th-generation fighter jets (Rafale and F-35). Given the current spiral of escalation, the parliamentary elections in Turkey in the summer of 2023, and the economic and political crisis of the Erdoğan government, Athens now considers a major military conflict more likely. While Athens is trying to internationalise the conflict in order to increase deterrence and to find a diplomatic solution, Ankara is pushing for a military incident with increasingly dubious accusations and demands. All signs are pointing towards escalation.

Geopolitical and security implications

The Greek-Turkish conflict is an example of an ongoing competition between democracies and authoritarian states over their reinterpretation of our existing world order, the applicability of international law, and the viability of Western alliances and collective security mechanisms. A conflict between countries in the Aegean Sea, including an expansion of Turkey's hybrid measures, would affect the cohesion and resilience of Western alliances in a number of ways. In light of the war in Ukraine, this would be a serious blow to cohesion within NATO, to European security, and to current efforts to ensure energy security in EU countries.

Firstly, this territorial conflict between two NATO member states highlights the absence of a suitable mechanism to regulate internal conflicts as a central issue facing

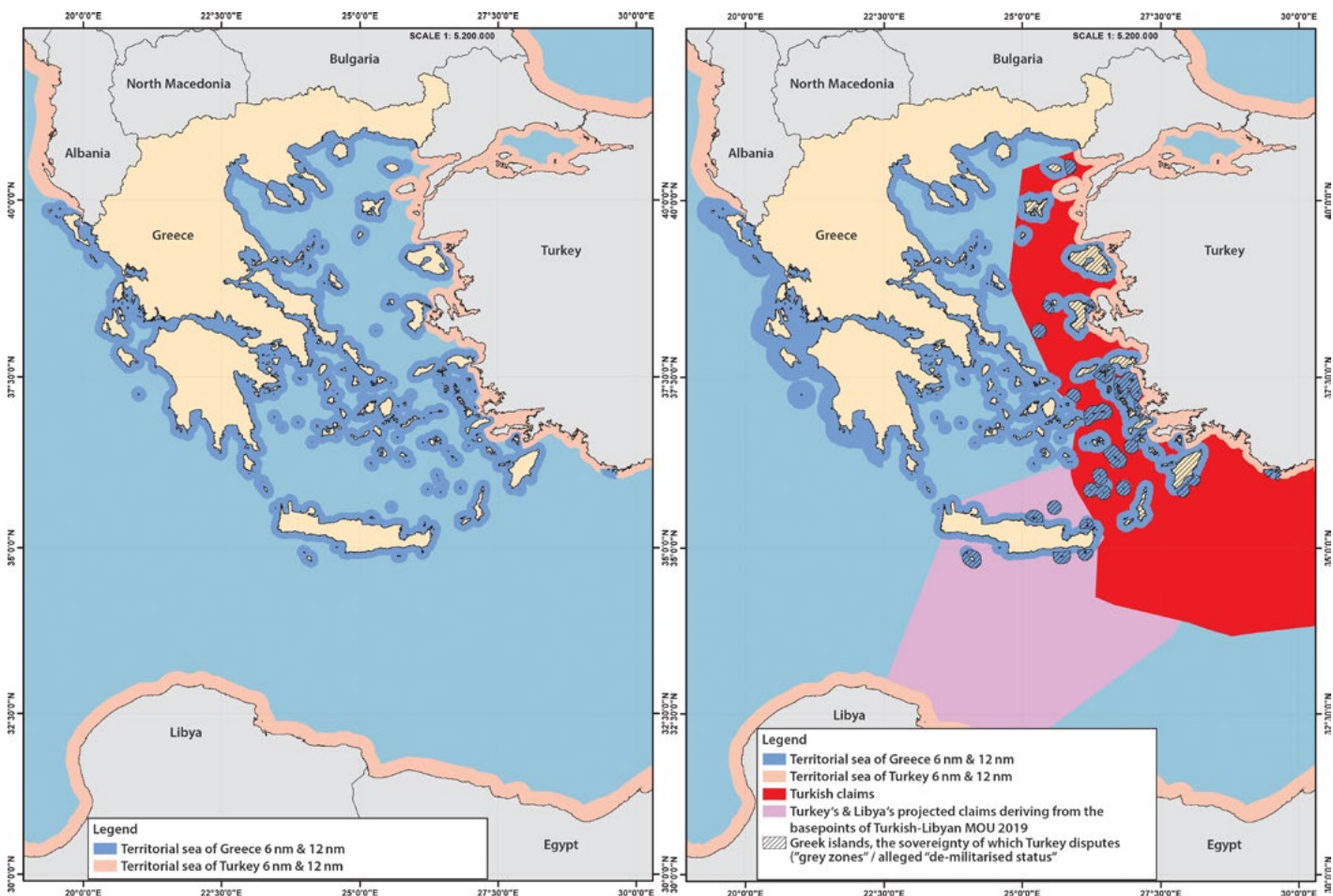


Fig. 4 Evolution of Turkish claims 1972 to 2022 | Source: MFA Greece, <https://tinyurl.com/yh5cx53u>



the Western defence alliance. In a scenario of this nature, NATO is paralysed; its inability to properly de-escalate the conflict between Greece and Turkey can be used as a blueprint by Russia and China to further weaken the Alliance in the future. What is more, the European NATO countries are faced with a legal dilemma: If Turkey were to attack Greece, they would – in accordance with Article 42 (7) of the EU Treaty – have to take action against a fellow NATO member.

Secondly, Turkey has already largely alienated itself from the West and deviates significantly from the positions of NATO and the EU on Syria and Libya. In the Ukraine war, it officially supports Kyiv without taking part in sanctions against Moscow. Russian arms transfers and a twofold increase in economic interconnections have also drawn Turkey further into the Russian camp. This is another reason why Ankara refuses to support Western sanctions against Russia. Moscow uses this to deliberately cause turmoil within NATO with the help of Turkey. While Turkey's primary purpose in blocking Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO is to achieve its own demands, it is mainly Moscow that benefits from this delay. What is more, Turkey's aspirations to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the BRICS group show that Ankara is openly looking for alternatives to NATO and the EU.

Thirdly, the Aegean conflict has further implications for the Greek-Turkish and European-Turkish rivalry over Cyprus and the potential exploitation of natural resources, while linking the Aegean dispute to the Cyprus problem further aggravates the political deadlock. In addition, the dispute is hampering cooperative border control efforts between the two countries in various other security-related policy areas and is allowing organised crime to expand its human and drug trafficking activities in the Aegean border region.

Fourthly, the EU's lack of resolve to respond quickly to external aggression and to prevent potential double standards (such as neglecting the rule of law and international law in favour of economic interests) shows that European foreign policy remains paralysed even though the Ukrainian war clearly demonstrates that swift action could prevent conflicts from escalating. The Aegean conflict is thus a major test of the Union's strategic autonomy and of its deterrence and defence capability.

Fifthly, the US has increasingly shifted its focus elsewhere and has reduced its troop contingents and bases in Turkey. Greece in particular is being established by the US as a strategic partner in the region. Billions of dollars invested in the NATO base in Crete and the expansion of the port of Alexandroupolis near the Dardanelles demonstrate the increased presence of US units in the Aegean Sea. The aim is to deny Russia access to the Mediterranean and to deter Turkey.

Sixthly, if relations between the EU and Turkey deteriorate, further state-organised or at least tolerated

migration movements at the EU's external borders become more likely. Turkey has already used migration as a hybrid measure to achieve political objectives: both directly – in 2020 along the river Evros – and indirectly – in 2021 together with Russia and Belarus. This practice is used not only as a diplomatic enforcement measure and to aggravate the security situation at the borders but especially to polarise the societies of the countries at which the practice is aimed.

Seventhly, a conflict in the Aegean would have serious consequences for energy security in Europe because most of the southern pipeline network runs through Turkey. In combination with reduced Russian imports, a further dispute between the EU and Turkey would interrupt gas supply from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Central sea routes in the Eastern Mediterranean would also be under threat, and maritime trade could come to a standstill, at least temporarily. Existing LNG terminals in the region, which supply the European pipeline network and are an essential factor in reducing dependence on Russia, would be severely disrupted, causing incalculable economic damage.

Eighthly, Ankara's aspiration to become a regional hegemon is strengthened if aggressive Turkish foreign policy is tolerated. As a consequence, Turkey would more vigorously assert its own interests in Libya, Syria, Northern Iraq and the Caucasus – interests that are contrary to those of the EU and NATO.

Recommendations for possible German involvement

Up to now, the united response of the West to the Russian invasion has delayed the outbreak of a conflict in the Aegean Sea. In order to prevent such a conflict in the future as well, Germany should consider taking the following security and economic measures together with its partners.

So far, Germany has mainly played the role of a mediator between Greece and Turkey. The euro and refugee crises, however, have dominated its political agenda. Since the end of 2021, due to a deterioration in relations between the EU and Turkey, Germany has assumed the role not only of a central mediator but also of a primary armaments partner in the region. This new role opens up numerous possibilities for reducing the risk of a conflict.

Initially, Germany would have to enter into closer cooperation with France and Greece in order to increase the deterrence capability in south-eastern Europe. In light of Turkey's demands, Paris and Athens have signed a mutual defence agreement, to which Berlin could become party. This not only would improve the security of energy-critical infrastructure, geostrategic sea routes and maritime bottlenecks but would also reduce Russian and Turkish activity in the Eastern Mediterranean. This could be achieved with the presence of EU contingents to provide military protection for the EU's external borders and



to preserve the territorial integrity of the member states. Measures to protect the EEZs of the EU countries in order to safeguard the EU's spheres of interest also need to be pursued more vigorously.

Berlin could then also provide materiel and personnel support to the US, France and Greece, which currently assume the bulk of deterrence tasks against Russia and Turkey in the region. This would also ease the burden on the US in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In addition, German arms exports can be tied more closely to conditions such as the rule of law, compliance with international law, and respect for human rights. This should also apply to already approved exports and licenses to Turkey, such as the six Type 214 submarines.

The current "ring exchange" with Greece is also proving to be a possible means of further strengthening the defence capabilities of the countries on the EU's external borders. When it comes to defending against hybrid threats, a bilateral or trilateral pilot project between Germany, France and Greece needs to be drawn up. Due to the complex challenges in the Aegean outlined above, the region is well suited for multidimensional operations in the context of multilateral cooperation to test the interaction between armed forces and EU services such as Frontex as well as local and civilian stakeholders.

In order to reduce Germany's vulnerability in terms of energy security and to better protect critical infrastructure such as ports, LNG terminals or pipelines, the establishment of an EU-wide response force to protect the region's critical infrastructure could also be initiated.

This would enable Germany and France, as lead European nations, to join forces to build the core of an EU resilience task force.

The Bundeswehr's bilateral cooperation with the Greek armed forces should also be expanded through established NATO and EU procedures. This includes research cooperation in the field of common armaments policy and protection against hybrid threats as well as for early crisis detection and strategic foresight.

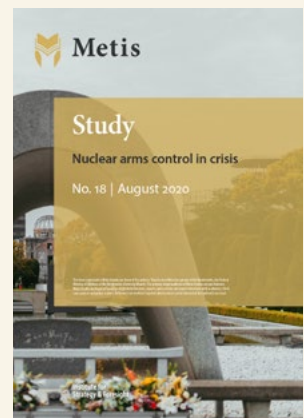
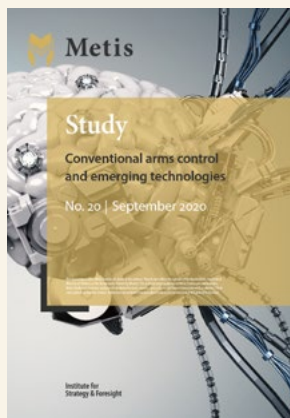
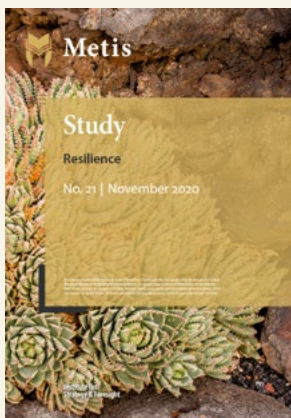
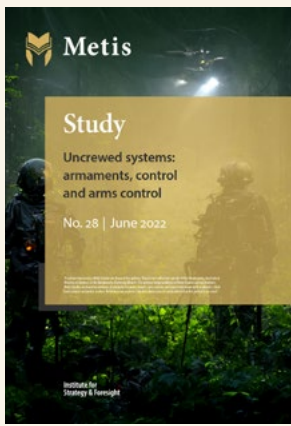
As the primary importer, Germany should also be an active participant in future pipeline projects that bypass Turkey (e.g. the Eastern Mediterranean pipeline) in order to reduce its dependence on Russia in the long term.

As far as Turkey is concerned, options are currently limited since Ankara's present political, military and economic positions are diametrically opposed to those of the West. Despite traditionally good relations, Ankara currently does not accept positions from Berlin or Washington and often causes diplomatic disquiet. Domestic pressure and the serious financial crisis in Turkey are forcing the Erdoğan government to rely on successes in foreign policy to generate support from the conservative camp. Any diplomatic initiatives of the West, especially those of the US, Germany and France, will thus not meet with a positive response. Ultimately, Europe's only remaining option is to try to prevent conflict through sanctions. In the long term, the EU and NATO need to plan for a post-Erdoğan government era and seek to eventually reintegrate Turkey into the Western alliances.



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