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Contemporary strategies and  
conflicts in the Aegean Sea region

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## *Contemporary strategies and conflicts in the Aegean Sea region*

### *Abstract:*

*The present paper tries to underline the major elements that constitute the core of the strategies that both Greece and Turkey implement in the Aegean Sea region. In this work, I try to compare the historical roots and the current identity and religious features of the two cultures with the realist strategical and geopolitical aims that the two countries have in the area. As all these important elements show how the basic structure of the conflict directly interacts with the identity-building process that drove several direct confrontations between these actors, including the tragic conflict in Cyprus in 1974 and the 1996 Aegean military crisis for the control of the Imia/Kardak islet. In order to privilege an uncritical and realist vision, I left current political discourses and circumstances outside the discussion, in order to focus the attention on the unchanging feature that demonstrated to be permanent and essential elements of the wider Aegean Sea framework.*

### *Keywords:*

*Greece, Turkey, Aegean see, Mediterranean see, Cyprus, Europe, Asia, Suez, Erdogan.*

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Documents are the responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense

## The Aegean Sea and Cyprus: the curse of being in a strategic position

The geopolitical and strategic importance of the Aegean Sea and of the island of Cyprus date its roots back to the birth of the human civilizations in the Near-East, when the territories of this region became intrinsically related to the cultural, commercial and military exchanges between the population of the West and the East. The major poems of the ancient Greek civilization, the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey”, have at the core of their narratives the identity-confrontation between cultures and the centrality of the Aegean Sea. Many myths and religious characteristics have since found place in the wider context of these portion of the Mediterranean Sea. For modern strategist and geopolitical analysts, like Spykman and Mackinder, the Aegean Sea and Cyprus constitute part of the Rimland. Their strategic importance is dictated by their role as natural southern frontier of the Eurasian region.

Consulting a map, it is not difficult to understand the strategic importance of the Aegean Sea, which impose itself as a natural pathway between the mouth of the Dardanelles Strait in the north and the central and eastern Mediterranean Sea to the south (see Map I). This first geographical observation permits some general consideration over its role as an unavoidable frontier between Greece and Turkey. The distribution of the roughly one thousand eight hundred islands and islets in the Aegean Sea, which belongs, spared a few exceptions, to Greece, constitutes a geographical proximity and continuity between the central Anatolian peninsula and the southern Greek peninsula, which inevitably put both sides in relation with each other according to the principle set by Kaplan: “*a State’s position on the map is the first thing that defines it, more than its governing philosophy even*”<sup>1</sup>.

Southern-eastern of the Aegean Sea, between the southern coast of Turkey and the coast of Syria in the east, lies the island of Cyprus. As Smilden observes, confirming implicitly Kaplan’s statement, through its long history Cyprus has been a captive of its own geography, undergoing several foreign dominations since the ancient times<sup>2</sup>. On a

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan Robert D., *The revenge of geography*, Random House publisher 2013, p. 28

<sup>2</sup> Smilden Jan-Erik, *Histories of Cyprus. The disputed years of Ottoman Rule, 1571-1878*, 2007, University of Oslo Department of Archaeology and History, link: <https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/23665/MicrosoftWordx-xMasterxJan->

modern map Cyprus plays a vital role as a strategic vector between the East and the West, especially, we might add, since the construction of the Suez Canal in 1869. After this turning point, the geopolitical role of Cyprus as a natural air carrier in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea was renewed. The control of the island permits a direct supervision of the strategic trade routes between Europe and Asia, which undergoes beneath Suez, as well as a direct influence over the coastline of the Middle East. In recent times, the *One Belt One Road* Chinese strategy, which started to invest resources and influence in several Mediterranean ports, the most important of which is the Greek Piraeus, has increased the overall importance of the island as the gateway to Europe.

In this paper, I wish to consider both the Aegean Sea and Cyprus as part of a unique geopolitical region, due to geographical, political and cultural similar characteristics. Also, because the actors directly involved in the decision-making process and those who exercise a geopolitical direct and indirect influence over these regions are the same and act considering both these elements as part of a common strategy. The island of Cyprus constitutes an ideal and natural extension in the southeast, of the strategic area linked to the Aegean Sea (see Map I). As Cyprus lies at only seventy-five kilometers from the coast of mainland Turkey, it is evident how this island constitutes a major element of concern for the Turkish authorities which find themselves, on a geographical dimension, surrounded by foreign territories between the Dardanelles and the Southern-Eastern Mediterranean Sea, living no real open access to the sea resource. The fear from the Turkish of the risk of being cut off as a sea power and diminishing their role as a regional power, is comprehensible. In fact, during the centuries the Aegean Sea has lived two opposing conditions. When the institutional authority on the two opposing peninsulas was united (Macedonian Kingdom, Byzantine Empire, Ottoman Empire) its strategic role was reduced (although not completely cancelled) as was the level of conflicts. On the contrary, political division of the territories that surround the Aegean Sea has always created a conflictual frontier between the different actors. When geography and States comes into direct confrontation the basic instinct of self-preservation of the State succumbs in front of the strategic priorities set by the natural configuration of its surroundings, or as Kaplan

explains: “Geography constitutes the very facts about international affairs that are so basic we take them for granted”<sup>3</sup>.



Figure 1: The Aegean Sea and the current official division of sovereignty between Greece and Turkey). Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aegean\\_dispute#/media/File:Aegean\\_with\\_legends.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aegean_dispute#/media/File:Aegean_with_legends.svg)

<sup>3</sup> Kaplan, p. 30

## The roots of the conflicts: the 1571 fall of Cyprus and the west-east clash

Although Geography explains the immediate reasons of conflict between Greece and Turkey in the Aegean-Cypriote region, historical, religious and cultural elements are still part of the perception that the two countries have of their identity and their enemy's. Despite Huntington's argumentation that the clash of civilizations is a major trait of the post-Cold War order<sup>4</sup>, the roots of the religious and identity confrontation between the people who live on the two sides of the Aegean Sea goes back to the times of the Ottoman conquest and has been a prominent element of conflict since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. When the Ottoman conquest of the Byzantine Empire, between the fall of Constantinople on the 29<sup>th</sup> of May 1453 and the Ottoman conquest last Venetian (and Western) port in Cyprus of Famagusta in 1571, ended a new social and political order was set in the territories of the new Ottoman Empire. The new shape of the social and religious relationships between the Muslim and the religious and ethnic minorities of the Sultanate ruled these lands and seas for nearly four hundred years and influenced the identity concept of these populations far after its dissolution, with consequences still visible in nowadays conflicts.

The fall of Constantinople in 1453, signed both the end of the presence of a strong Christian Eastern power in Europe, and the violent arrive of a hostile rising Muslim new Empire at the borders of the European Catholic states and nations. The hybrid characteristics of Byzantium, a Christian empire with Eastern elements in its culture, were replaced by an Islamic Sultanate ruled according to the religious laws and customs. The first major shift in the new state policy was from a Roman conception of the universality of the state as a guarantor of laws and duties, to the implementation of the *millet* system. The millet regime consisted in the division of the society in distinct religious communities, and the establishment of different laws for the members of each community, based on their holy books, principles and traditional practices<sup>5</sup>. In order to implement this new structure, the Ottoman government, the Diwan, co-opted the Christian-Orthodox clergy, as well the Jewish rabbis, in the state structure and made them as public functionaries in charge of implementing the law in their respective

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?*, The Foreign Affairs issue of Summer 1993, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations>

<sup>5</sup> Ebubekir Ceylan, *The millet system in the Ottoman Empire*, published in *New Millennium Perspectives in the Humanities*, 2002 Global Humanities Press, p. 247

communities<sup>6</sup>. In addition to that, all non-Muslim subjects of the Sultan had to pay annually a special tax, called *cizye* or convert to Islam.

In Cyprus, for example, the Orthodox Church increased its social and political importance under the new regime. “According to the practice within the Ottoman millet system, the religious leader became indeed both the spiritual and political head of his subjects.<sup>152</sup> In tradition with the millet system, the Church got the right to tax its parishioners and pass judgements in civilian and religious matters”<sup>7</sup>. The millet system, in addition to contribute to a certain stability under a quasi-feudal regime, was politically functional to guarantee the loyalty of the new subjects. After centuries of European domination, the Greek people of Cyprus and many Aegean island, had suffered the constant conflict between the Latin and the Orthodox religious authorities<sup>8</sup>. The wise move of the Ottoman power, restoring an apparent political dimension for the Orthodox Church, while persecuting the Roman Catholic, contributed in buying support and avoiding risks of main revolts. Despite modern Turkish scholars’ claim that this attitude worked as a defense of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity, the truth is that for nearly four hundred years, Muslims and Christians, Ottoman Turks on one side and Greek, Armenians and Slavs on the other, lived in separated neighborhoods, were subject to different laws and celebrated different festivals. All these favored the development of separate identities inside the same statehood, which would become uncontrollable once the nationalist ideals started to spread across Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The gradual rise of the Ottoman power at the border of Europe was initially directed towards a terrestrial trajectory. The projection of an Ottoman sea power was conceived later, mainly after the conquest of the Byzantine Empire, which left the Sultanate with no major antagonist except for the Western maritime Republics of Venetia and Genoa, and the Order of St. John, that controlled several Aegean islands, used as trade post on the routes for the Eastern markets of the Middle East and the Crimean regions. The terrestrial unification operated by the new Sultanate clashed against the constants peril

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<sup>6</sup> Smilden, p. 37

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 39-40

<sup>8</sup> In 1453, answering to the pleas for help maiden by the Byzantine Emperor, the Western European powers posed as pre-condition for the military defence of Constantinople the conversion of the Orthodox Byzantine subjects to Roman Catholicism. To mark this change, the last Easter Holy mass in Agia Sofia church was practised according to the Latin rite.

opposed by the frequent naval interventions of the Genoese and Venetian fleets against the Ottoman ports and convoys.

The Ottoman conquest of the major European Aegean colonies was conducted very rapidly after the fall of Constantinople, and by 1479 it was completed, with the main exceptions of Cyprus and Crete that remain under European control. Between the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Aegean Sea maintained a minor strategic importance in the wider European picture. It staged the Venetian-Ottoman conflicts, while the major European powers had shifted their attention to the newly-discovered lands across the Atlantic Ocean and to the Central European conflicts<sup>9</sup>. The Venetian Republic, the last European power present in the area, and the Ottoman Empire clashed in successive wars over the control of the Aegean Sea and of the island of Crete and the free access for the Venetian ships to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. A strategic spot for Venice, Crete was not only its richest colony, but also a springboard into the Eastern trade routes. The severe defeats of Lepanto (1571) and Vienna (1683), whipped the Ottoman aspirations for an advance in Central Europe and in the Adriatic Sea, placing the Sultanate in a defensive position of its territories. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Republic of Venetia was definitively driven out of the Aegean Sea, leaving it, for few decades at least, becoming an Ottoman lake, without other strategic importance other than the defense of the Sultanate control over the Aegean and Cyprus regions.

### **Constituting elements: identities, conflicts and treaties**

The creation of the Modern Greek identity was a process that took place between the Greek War of Independence of 1821 and the Balkan Wars 1912-13 and went parallel with the territorial expansion of the Greek state. The Aegean islands and Cyprus were strongly influenced by the events in the Greek mainland, and the respective Turkish process of modernization. Although in Cyprus the different identities assumed some specific local features, analyzing the major aspects of both the Greek and the Turkish identities is possible to comprehend some of the cultural elements involved in the current confrontation.

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<sup>9</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II*, Volume II, University of California Press 1996, p. 666-667

Three main factors are at the core of the Greek current identity, the religion, the nationalist sentiment and the pro-Western stance of the country since independence. The millet regime preserved for centuries the language, the traditions and the practices of the Greek inhabitants of the Aegean islands and of Cyprus, collecting all these elements under a Church leadership. The fusion of the religious element with the ethnic identity, and the constant discrimination and separation from the Ottoman society and power, prevented the spread of doctrinal divisions (as it had happened in Europe with the Lutheran Reformation), or the creation of a secularist movement (like the one that accompanied most of the revolutions since the French of 1789). According to a survey conducted in 2017 by the Pew Research Center, Greece is the country with the highest number of Christians among the European Union countries, as seventy-six out of one hundred citizens declare themselves Christian Orthodox<sup>10</sup>. The Greek Constitution of 1975, which is open by the invocation of the Holy and Consubstantial and Indivisible Trinity, states at the beginning of article 3: << *The prevailing religion in Greece is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ.*<sup>11</sup>>>. Religious practices are present in Greek public life, particularly in the political and the military ceremonies.

Parallel to the homogeneous ethnic-religious pattern, Greek nationalism followed another parallel trajectory. The other aspiration of the new state was to revise the Ottoman power over the Eastern Mediterranean, and substitute it recreating a strong wide Greek state between Greece and Anatolia, with Constantinople as its capital. This ideal was declined in the 'Megali Idea' (The Great Idea) ideology, a discourse that dominated Greek politics till 1922. The Aegean Sea islands became vital elements of this project. In addition to be a source of livelihood, the domain of the sea was essential in order to guarantee the continuity of the Greek state composed by natural peninsulas, and of regions divided by natural mountainous barriers. The Greek invasion of Anatolia of 1921-1922, and the military defeat that Greece suffered in this attempt put an end to the Megali Idea vision. The subsequent Treaty of Lausanne draw the current borders between Greece and Turkey, leaving outside the Greek state the conspicuous

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<sup>10</sup> Survey available at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/pf-10-29-18-east-west-00-02/>

<sup>11</sup> Article 3, Constitution of the Hellenic Republic 1975, full text available at: <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/f3c70a23-7696-49db-9148-f24dce6a27c8/001-156%20aggliko.pdf>

minorities living in Constantinople and Smirne, and a Muslim Turkish-speaking minority in Greek-controlled Western Thrace region. At the base of the way modern Greece sees its relations with the Turkish bordering country, play an important role the aborted dream of the reconstruction of a great Greek state in the east, and the ideal desire to exercise a kind of influence over the lost capital of Constantinople, where the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate, composed by culturally Greek clerics, is still present as the last legacy of the ancient Byzantine Empire. In addition to that, more concrete strategical essential elements also influence this vision, and are strongly related with the maintenance of a strong Greece rule over the Aegean islands.

The third element constituting the Greek identity it's the geographical, cultural and political self-projection between the East and the West. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the attention that Enlightenment express towards the ancient Greek culture and history, new sympathy emerged in Europe for the Greek people and their condition. The West was seen as an ally and a source of inspiration for sectors of the Greek society. The French Revolution and the French Civil Code inspired the building of the Modern Greek political institutions. However, another part of the Greek society, linked to the Orthodox Church, developed a pro-Russia sentiment, that is still present and influent today. The long decades of Communist rule over the former Russian Empire, and the limitation of the Orthodox Russian culture, left Greece with no option than to seek for more Western support against Turkish menace. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, this second anti-Western faction has re-emerged, making of Greece a strange case of a Western allied country with pro-Eastern culture and sympathy.

To summarize, Modern Greek identity was build during a long process that merged together the essential self-determination of the Greek Orthodox communities with the nationalist ideal of a dominant power in the Aegean, the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean as heir of the lost glories of the Byzantine Empire. In this process, Greece found itself collocated in the Western hemisphere, conscious that only a wise counter-balancing long-term strategy could help its strategic goals to maintain under control the Aegean and contrast the constant menace of Turkey. Many cultural and political elements, especially the values that inspired the Greek War of Independence, also pushed Greece towards the West. This setting is clear when it comes to the

decision by Greece to join the major regional European and Western organization such as the European Union and NATO.

Contemporary Turkish identity was created in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Western models started to penetrate the Ottoman Empire, while the emerging Greek and Slave nationalism in the Balkans constantly challenged its political position. Influenced by the technological advance of Europe and the spread of new nationalist ideals, Mustafa Kemal and a group of young officers of the Ottoman army, affiliated to the Young Turks society, worked to put an end to the Islamic Sultanate. After the defeat in the First World War, Kemal obtained strong popular legitimization leading between 1922 and 1923 a successful military campaign against the Greek and Western forces that had occupied the Anatolian peninsula and was able to establish the new Turkish republic in 1923. From this moment on he would become the father of the new country. His 1922 victory frustrated the attempt of the Greeks to complete the Megali Idea project *liberating* Constantinople.

At the core of Kemal's ideas, and the consequent evolution of the modern Turkish state, there were two parallel elements. The internal secularization and modernization process, and the relationship with the West. Regarding the first, the main goal of the Turkish leader was to confine Islam in the private sphere, while the state had the duty to oversee that no political use of Islam could be done. For nearly eighty years, Kemal's vision about secularism would become known as *Turkish laicism*. Education was taken away from the public institutions and given to the state, Latin alphabet and Western calendars were adopted, and women gained much more freedom under the Civil Code than they had before with the sharia law<sup>12</sup>. The military elite assumed a prominent role in the new state projecting itself as a defender of secularism and arbiter of the political disputes. Despite all these efforts, religion remained largely followed by the Turks living in the Anatolian hinterland, while most of the people living in Constantinople and the western coastal cities secularized. The secular state's attitude towards the religious institutions became severe, and constructed an opposition that cemented its sentiments around different Islamic political opposition parties, that ultimately had success with the AKP party and Recep Erdogan's election in 2001. Secularism and development were

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<sup>12</sup> Zeyno Baran, Torn Country: Turkey between Secularism and Islamism, 2012, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, p.25-26

often opposed by the Kemalist state to religiousness and decadence, even though religious identity never ceased to be part of self-description for most of the Turks.

### **Strategic elements in the Aegean Sea and in Cyprus**

The Lausanne Treaty of 1923, followed by partial exchange of population between the two countries determined to create ethnical homogeneous countries, established the modern definition of the territorial borders between Greece and Turkey in Thrace. Since then, the territorial border has not been questioned in its validity, all the crisis that took place between the two countries involved the Aegean Sea and the island of Cyprus. Strategically, the core of the Aegean confrontation can be divided in two major elements. The first is the dispute about the sovereignty over the islands and the islets, their military status and the Turkish aspiration to obtain a safe access to the Aegean Sea. The second element is the economic use of the natural resources deposit present in the Aegean continental shelf, the dispute about the extension of the territorial waters, the rights to extract the undersea natural resources and the consequent legal aspects of this matter. Around these two elements the natural tendencies for expansion and domination of both Greece and Turkey develop their strategies.

In general lines, the Greek strategy in the Aegean Sea can be described as the attempt to transform this sea in an internal lake, refuse any direct talk with Turkey over the sovereignty of the islands and islets and use the sea power as a strong deterrent of the military superiority (as for numbers) of the Turkish armed forces. Central in this strategy has been in the last half-century the external counter-balancing process put in place by Greece with the membership of NATO and the European Union. Although both supranational institutions responded to immediate political internal necessities (avoid the spread of communism the former, economic and social development the latter), in the long-term strategy Greece has always seek a wider alliance where it could internationalize its disputes with Turkey. National Security has always played an important role in the state policies, as well demonstrated by the high budget expenditure for defense, around 6% of annual GDP sustained by Greece even during the difficult years of the economic crisis.

On its part, Turkish strategy, under the semblance of the nationalist, militarist and recently neo-Ottoman rhetoric, aims to obtain a safe access to the Aegean Sea altering only a relatively small part of the status quo. In recent decades the Turkish authorities have both requested for direct negotiations over the sovereignty of some of islands or used the military tool, to obtain negotiating or tactical advantages. Regarding the Aegean islands, Turkey follows a parallel strategy, advocating on one side the fulfillment of a general demilitarization of all the islands that lie in front of her coasts, and at the same time claiming the presence of grey-zones of ambiguous sovereignty<sup>13</sup>. As for the first claim, Turkey exercise a series of legal arguments against Greek military presence in the area. Specifically, it points out that the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits allowed only Turkey to remilitarize the Dardanelles Strait, while Greece respond that Turkey agreed on the remilitarization of the Greek islands of Limnos and Samothrace that are positioned at the end of the Dardanelles. Also, the 1923 Lausanne Treaty states that the islands of Mytilene, Chios, Samos and Ikaria could not host naval bases or fortifications. Nothing is specified about ordinary military presence, and this creates a clear point of conflict. Finally, the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947, according to which the Dodecanese islands passed from Italy to Greece, establish a regime of demilitarization of these islands<sup>14</sup>. Despite the clear validity of the treaty, Greece from its part consider this prevision null as the membership of the same in the NATO would have make impossible for Greece to maintain demilitarize zones in its territory.

The grey-zones theory relies on the Turkish-side interpretation of the historical legal status of the Aegean islands. According to the Turkish government, all the islets that were not named in the Lausanne Treaty, the legal document that witnessed the passage of the Dodecanesos from the Ottoman Empire to Italy, must be considered as part of Turkey. The claim is rejected by Greece, which considers these islets as covered by the denomination of the major near islands and pointed on the maps that were

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<sup>13</sup> Ioannis Matzis, *Geopolitical Analysis of the Commercial Sea Channel Dardanelles-Aegean Sea*, Published first in: *Archives of Economic History* VIII: 1-2 (1996), p.146

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic, *Turkish claims regarding the demilitarization of islands in the Aegean Sea*, 18 June 2018 text available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/issues-of-greek-turkish-relations/relevant-documents/turkish-claims-regarding-the-demilitarization-of-islands-in-the-aegean-sea.html>

attached to the Treaty. As the Imia/Kardak episode illustrated, Turkey, despite its assessments, does not exercise a real authority over these islets, or try to do so.

In the recent past, this stance drove the two country near to war. In 1997 a Turkish commando occupied the Imia/Kardak islet, between the Greek island of Kalimnos and the Turkish coast. The crisis erupted when a Turkish tv team landed on the inhabited islet and raised a Turkish flag, followed by similar action from the Greek inhabitants of near Kalimnos island. The US direct intervention on the two sides, avoided a direct military confrontation, but left the situation unsettled. Similarly, Turkey frequently applies the grey-zones theory against military and official Greek aircrafts which flight on contested spaces, and has to face the harassment from Turkish military jets.

In the last years two new major problems have arisen, to further complicate the security situation in the Aegean Sea. In October 2018, the Greek government announced its intention to extend its sovereign rights on the sea to the limit of 12 miles, the maximum conceded by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The announcement (Turkey had taken a similar action in the late 1980s) was motivated by the increasing involvement of international activities in the Aegean Sea, related to the presence of NATO vessels deployed to fight the illegal passage of refugees and migrants from Turkey to Europe. However, Turkey keeps her claims over the search and exploitation of natural undersea resources on the base of the former 6-miles policy implemented by Greece, which would still leave a large part of the internal Aegean Sea under international waters. In addition to this, always related to undersea natural resources, in the last decade Cyprus gained the international attention for the discovery of rich underwater deposits of natural gas in its Economic Exclusive Zone<sup>15</sup>. This discovery reopened the discussion about a possible reunification of the island, motivated by the common exploitation of natural gas, as the northern Turkish-occupied side of Cyprus is much poorer than the south. However, Turkey expressed a different vision for the resources acting as a protector of the self-proclaimed and not internationally recognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. In response to the increased Turkish military presence around it's sovereign waters, the Republic of Cyprus is building a wide international alliance in order to counter-balance Turkish possible reactions. Major

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<sup>15</sup> SÁNCHEZ TAPIA, Felipe. *Geopolítica del gas y militarización del Mediterráneo Oriental*. Documento de Análisis IEEE 05/2019 [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2019/DIEEEA05\\_2019FELIPE-Mediterraneo.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2019/DIEEEA05_2019FELIPE-Mediterraneo.pdf)

actors involved in this strategy are Israel, Egypt, Italy's and France's private oil companies, and their respective governments, as well as a large part of the US establishment recently increasingly critical with Erdogan's government actions in Syria and towards Russia. Israel, whose EEZ borders with the Cypriote one, and undergoes a difficult relationship with Erdogan's Islamist regime, has also created a convergence both with Nicosia and Athens on the common security of the industrial installation in the open sea.

As balance in the Aegean is currently pending on the Greek side, Athens appears to act as a conservative power, interested in de-escalating and disengage Turkish provocations and menaces over the Aegean Sea and Cyprus. In the last decades, Turkish revisionist claims have been played mainly on the rhetoric stage, with strong exchanges of accuses and communicates between the two parts, but not much more than that. While Turkey exercised a strong use of pride, the Greek side has been more concerned with interest and fears over this matter. Occasional casualties during the aerial violation of airspace, the last is as late as April 2018<sup>16</sup>, or the capture of two Greek soldiers while patrolling the Greek-Turkish border in Thrace as a retaliation for the asylum-seeker Turkish soldiers involved in the 2016 attempted coup<sup>17</sup>, never drove to a military escalation from the Greek side, more concerned with the defense of the actual assets than the incidental specific situation.

## Conclusions

As Thucydides said three thousand years ago, states operate motivated by three essential elements: fear, interest and pride. Analyzing the strategical situation in the Aegean Sea-Cyprus region, under everyday politics it is possible to see how these elements conduct a redline trajectory that overcomes changes and times and is still dictating the countries policies and actions. In the last two centuries the Aegean region has been object of constant conflict over the domain of its strategic passage between

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<sup>16</sup> Greek fighter pilot dies after jet crashes in Aegean Sea amid rising tensions with Turkey, 12 April 2018, The Independent. Article available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/greece-fighter-jet-crash-missing-pilot-aegean-sea-turkey-skyros-mirage-a8301281.html>

<sup>17</sup> Helena Smith, Greeks vent fury over soldiers being 'held hostage' in Turkey, 12 March 2018, The Guardian, article available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/11/greek-protesters-demand-release-of-two-soldiers-held-in-turkey>

the West and the East, as a potential source of connection to the Mediterranean for the Russian Empire-Soviet Union-Russia. As a belt region between the Middle East, North Africa and Euroasia, any major power that claimed an international role (from Great Britain to the US) has demonstrate interest and will to dominate the region, either in the Aegean Sea or in Cyprus or in both. Despite being away from the Wester-European chronicles, this region remains one of the most important for the future tenure of the European Union project as well as for the maintenance of peace and stability in Europe. At the same time, taken in account the Ukrainian situation, the Aegean region is probably the most likely to involve a direct armed conflict between a European nation and a non-European one soon.

Since 1974, the situation on the ground between Greece and Turkey has resembled that of a local cold war, with its low-intensity conflicts and victims both in the Aegean Sea and in Cyprus. Despite proximity, and many anthropological common elements, Greece and Turkey live in the constant security dilemma over each other, as the high military expenditures and the heavy militarization of both the territorial border and the sea one demonstrates. Between the two, Greece is the one that must fear more, as it is the dominant power over the Aegean Sea, while Turkey acts as the revisionist force over the islands dispute. It is evident how the failed membership process of Turkey to join the European Union prevented a supranational institution to try to solve the interest conflict of the two countries. Without a political or economic superior power that acts as a merging factor among Greece's and Turkey's interest, as the EU did in the Norther Ireland issue for example, no possible bilateral solution is likely to take place any moment in the future. Even when Erdogan's personal autocratic regime shall collapse, as Turkey has demonstrated through its history, the basic need to expand its influence and control towards the Aegean Sea and the Balkans will cease to exist.

The counter-balancing strategy implemented so far by Greece, was not always successful as the 1974 turn out of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus demonstrated, and especially the lack of robust guarantees that the European Union membership has provided to Greece. As the discussion to create a common European Army has been delayed by most of the governments, the EU lacks a real political and military plan to address the concrete case of a Greek-Turkish war in the Aegean Sea or in Cyprus. This weakness is well compensated by the US influence and NATO infrastructure, both less

interested in solving a long-standing conflict and more focused on preserving the American strategical goals in the region. As US influence all over the world is slightly declining and new actor appears with economic investments and military presence, the future of the US presence in the region, although it is not under discussion, appears destined to change especially if the energetic exploitation and infrastructure will become an international sensible element.

As Greek poet Kazantzakis wrote about the Aegean Sea in one of his poems: “Two equally steep and bold paths may lead to the same peak. To act as if death did not exist, or to act thinking every minute of death, is perhaps the same thing”, death and life are everyday in the game of the Aegean Sea. A military conflict between Greece and Turkey is a constant threat to the regional stability and security, as the low-intense conflict that is ongoing directly includes Thucydides’ elements of fear and interest, as well as the pride one. Nationalist rhetoric in both countries, strong ethno-religious identity and mighty of the military structures are all elements that create a dangerous environment to manage a potential-conflict crisis. As history demonstrate, war is the domain of unpredictability. Any error at the military or political level can drive the region to a major conflict, and potentially demonstrate a weakness in the European Union security strategy that might lead to severe consequences for the future of the wider area.

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