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TRANSFORMATION OF SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN TÜRKİYE-GREECE RELATIONS

Security and security perceptions may change over time depending on the actors involved and the structure of the international system. These changes can be clearly observed in Türkiye-Greece relations.

Türkiye and Greece's relations and perceptions of each other have been shaped by many factors. Since its foundation, Türkiye has based its relations with Greece on peace. In the period running up to World War II, the two states

acted together in the Balkan Entente against the revisionist states. After the Second World War, the blocs became increasingly sharpened. In this framework, the US developed projects such as the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, in which Türkiye and Greece were also involved, to prevent the propagation of communism. The fact that both countries joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) clearly indicates which side they stood on in the bipolar international system.

Starting in the 1950s, the problems that would become central to the way the two NATO allies perceived each other began to take shape: Cyprus Issue and the Aegean Dispute. Since then, Cyprus in particular has become a national issue for the Turkish public. The 1960 Treaty of Nicosia and the establishment of a Federal Republic of Cyprus under the guarantorship of Türkiye, Greece, and the United Kingdom did not provide a solution to the tension on the island, and the violence directed by the Greek Cypriot side against the Turkish Cypriots resulted in Türkiye's military intervention in Cyprus in 1974, using its right of guarantorship, and from this date onwards, the Cyprus Issue has been at the centre of Turkish foreign policy. Moreover, the arms embargo imposed on Türkiye after the Cyprus Peace Operation also affected Türkiye and the United States of America relations. The influence of the Greek Cypriot lobby in the United States on this arms embargo decision is noteworthy.

Another issue that escalated the tensions between the two countries was the Aegean Dispute that emerged in the 1970s. The Aegean Islands, which were armed by Greece in violation of the Treaty of Lausanne, caused Türkiye to perceive Greece as a threat. Greece's desire to extend its territorial waters to 12 nautical miles was considered by Türkiye as a "casus belli", in other words, an act of war. As a matter of fact, Greece's 12 nautical miles of territorial waters would prevent Türkiye's direct access to the high seas. However, the Davos Process, which started with Turgut Özal's government in 1986, aimed at repairing bilateral relations through dialogue and cooperation. Özal's preference was also influenced by Türkiye's desire to become a member of the European Economic Community. This dialogue process did not result in a

complete resolution of the existing problems.

Throughout the 1990s, Greece perceived Türkiye as a security threat and tried to establish close relations with the countries with which Türkiye had problems in its foreign policy and to build a strategy through the terrorist organisation PKK. During this period, the Aegean Dispute and oil exploration activities continued and eventually the escalating tension brought the two countries to the brink of war with the Kardak Dispute.

The change of government in Greece in 1996 led to a detente in relations. At the NATO Summit in 1997, a Common Accord was signed and it was agreed to maintain relations on the basis of peace, security and good neighbourliness. Greece has relatively softened its position on territorial waters and Turkey has taken a softer stance, even though the cause for war has not disappeared, as the probability of this possibility becoming a reality has decreased. Thus, the security perceptions of the two countries towards each other have changed and domestic politics played a role in this. After Greece joined the EU, it started to pursue a policy of maintaining its relations with Türkiye under the EU umbrella. In almost every kind of problem, the EU has organisation has been against Türkiye. Therefore, Greece attached importance to Türkiye establishing good relations with the EU, but at a limited level. After the 1997 Luxembourg Summit, the deterioration of Türkiye-EU relations was a matter of concern for Greece.

One of the important factors in Türkiye's perception of Greece as a security threat is terrorism. The capture of Öcalan at the Greek Embassy in Kenya with a Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus

passport made Greece a sponsor of terrorism in both Turkish and international public opinion and caused a crisis that led to the change of the Foreign Minister in Greece. The subsequent Greek Foreign Minister Yorgos Papandreou and the Turkish Foreign Minister İsmail Cem Küçük entered a period of détente in relations. The earthquake disasters in Türkiye and Greece in 1999 initiated a process known as "earthquake diplomacy" between the two countries. However, the common defense agreements between Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus made Greece a threat to Turkish security once again.

In the recent period, the security perceptions of the two countries are shaped by domestic politics, natural disasters, energy resources, relations with the EU, and armament. Especially the armament of islands and airspace violations continue to create a security dilemma between the two countries. Before the elections in 2023, issues such as national defense, the continental shelf and public perceptions of mutual security threats dominated domestic politics in Turkey and Greece, but after the elections, there were signs of detente in relations.

Following the earthquakes of 6 February 2023, the Turkish National Security Council made statements supporting the preservation of the positive atmosphere in bilateral relations with Greece, stating its

belief that this positive situation would benefit both sides.¹ Based on this example, it can be considered that earthquake diplomacy, as in 1999, also had an impact on the relative improvement of relations.

In the period following the approval of Sweden's acceptance into NATO by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's return to a policy of improving its relations with the EU was welcomed by Greek decision-makers. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who met with President Erdoğan at the Vilnius Summit of NATO, stated after the meeting that while the problems between Türkiye and Greece have not disappeared but that he intends to open a new chapter in Turkish-Greek relations.²

Greece's former Defence Minister Nikos Dendias also expressed his desire to de-escalate the conflict and create an environment of trust in the Eastern Mediterranean. The new Minister, on the other hand, invited Türkiye to engage in dialogue on the problems in the Aegean Sea.³ It can be seen that the newly elected Greek government sees the continuation of the government in Türkiye after the elections as an opportunity to improve relations. As in the past, Türkiye's resolution of its problems with Greece is still a precondition for improving its relations with the EU.

¹ "Turkey Hails Warmer Ties with Greece | EKathimerini.Com", *EKathimerini*, 31 Mach 2023, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1207808/turkey-hails-warmer-ties-with-greece/>.

² "Leaders of Turkey, Greece Agree to Restore Ties", *Al Jazeera*, 12 July 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/12/mitsotakis-erdogan-hail-positive-climate-in-greece-turkey-ties..>

³ "Dendias Welcomes De-Escalation in East Med without Directly Referring to Turkey | EKathimerini.Com", *EKathimerini*, 06 July 2023, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1214827/dendias-welcomes-de-escalation-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-without-directly-referring-to-turkey/>.

The partial change in Greece's perception of Türkiye can be attributed to Türkiye's rapprochement with the EU. Greece's growing concern about a Turkey distanced from the EU has been seen before. Although the Greek Government and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus have expressed their satisfaction with the re-launch of the dialogue between Türkiye and the EU, they have stressed that the steps to be taken should be mutual and, if necessary, "reversible".⁴ These statements show that Türkiye has not completely vanished from being a threat in Greece's security perception.

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has once again emphasized Türkiye's geopolitical importance, especially in terms of energy and food security. Moreover, the political space for maneuver that Sweden and Finland have thanks to Türkiye's veto on NATO membership, coupled with the intensifying migration crisis, makes cooperation between Türkiye and the EU even more critical. In this international context, security threats are not only conventional but also include the areas such as food, environment, energy and cyber security. Cooperation is becoming increasingly important in overcoming all these threats.

The Cyprus Issue should not be forgotten in the development of Türkiye-EU relations. This problem is also one of the cornerstones of relations between Türkiye and Greece. Both states maintain mutual scepticism. In addition, statements from both state leaders and governments show the desire to improve relations. Although no concrete steps have been taken yet, it

can be thought that bilateral relations may improve, especially these days when both countries are struggling with natural disasters.

Finding areas where the two countries can cooperate will contribute to the realization of these positive signals. Today, Europe is trying to reduce its energy dependence on Russia. In this context, Turkey and Greece cooperating rather than competing over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean would be better for energy security and would positively affect regional security. In addition, in this period when we are experiencing the effects of the climate crisis intensely, the cooperation of the two countries in the Aegean and Mediterranean to combat the negative effects of climate change and related natural disasters will contribute to environmental security.

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⁴ "Greece and Cyprus Welcome EU Bid to Re-Engage with Turkey, but Urge Caution", *Reuters*, 31 July 2023,

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