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## THE LONGSTANDING DISPUTE BETWEEN TURKEY AND GREECE: THE AEGEAN ISSUE

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate Turkey's longstanding problematic relations with Greece regarding the Aegean dispute and the impact of this dispute on the EU-Turkey relations and vice-versa. It argues that, first, the Aegean Sea issue is one of the main problems between Greece and Turkey as well as the European Union (EU) and Turkey. Due to the increasing debates over the sources and statues of Aegean Sea and East Mediterranean, the struggle between the Turks and Greeks to establish and extend their zones of jurisdiction over the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas maintain to be a fundamental issue between Greece and Turkey and the EU and Turkey. Second, the problematic relationship between the EU and Turkey prevents the EU from having a positive impact on the Turkish-Greek conflict as well as Turkey's policy toward the Aegean issue. The quality and peace of EU-Turkey relations are and will be, therefore, determinant in the solution of this longstanding dispute between sides as well as the transformation of Turkey's policy toward the Aegean issue.

**Keywords:** Turkey's foreign policy, Turkey-Greece relations, Turkey-EU relations, Aegean issue

**Jel Classification:** International Relations, National Security, and International Political Economy: General; International Institutional Arrangements

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## TÜRKİYE VE YUNANİSTAN ARASINDA UZUN SÜREN ANLAŞMAZLIK: EGE SORUNU

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### Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Türkiye'nin Yunanistan ile Ege anlaşmazlığı konusundaki uzun zamandır devam eden sorunlu ilişkilerini ve bu anlaşmazlığın Avrupa Birliği (AB)- Türkiye ilişkileri üzerindeki etkisini incelemektir. İlk olarak Ege meselesinin Yunanistan ve Türkiye ile AB ve Türkiye arasındaki temel sorunlardan biri olduğu tartışılmaktadır. Doğu Akdeniz'in kaynakları ve statüsü üzerinde artan tartışmalar nedeniyle, Türkler ve Yunanlılar arasında Ege ve Akdeniz denizleri üzerinde kendi hakimiyet bölgelerini kurma ve genişletme mücadelesi Yunanistan ile Türkiye ve Türkiye ile AB arasında temel bir sorun olmaya devam edeceği not edilmektedir. İkinci olarak, AB ile Türkiye arasındaki sorunlu ilişkilerin, AB'nin Türk-Yunan çatışmasına ve Türkiye'nin Ege ve Akdeniz'e yönelik politikaları üzerinde olumlu bir etkiye sahip olmasına engel teşkil ettiği öne sürülmektedir. Bu nedenle, AB-Türkiye ilişkilerinin kalitesi ve hızının Türkiye-Yunanistan arasında uzun zamandır devam eden anlaşmazlıkların çözümünde ve Türkiye'nin Ege ve Akdeniz meselelerine yönelik politikasının dönüşümünde belirleyici olacağı not edilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türk dış politikası, Türkiye-Yunanistan ilişkileri, Türkiye-AB ilişkileri, Ege sorunu

**Jel sınıflandırması:** Uluslararası İlişkiler, Ulusal Güvenlik ve Uluslararası Politik Ekonomi

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## 1. Introduction

Turkey and Greece follow a security-oriented foreign policy toward the Aegean issue for eon. The debates over maritime and aerial zones of the jurisdiction in the Aegean Sea and threat perceptions rising from the safety of Turkey's west coast (for Greece safety of its islands in the Aegean Sea) were the main driving forces behind the problematic relations between Turkey and Greece and Turkey's security-oriented foreign policy toward Greece and vice versa. The securitisation of the Aegean issue caused political crises between sides, which made it difficult for the development of political and economic relations and negotiations for the resolution of problems between two countries through dialogue and diplomacy. During the first decade of the 2000s, traditional security-oriented disengagement Turkish foreign policy towards the Aegean issue had been gradually replaced with dialogue and engagement oriented foreign policy in accordance with the EU calls. The political crises stemming from the Aegean issue have ended. With the degenerating EU-Turkey relations in the post-2010 period, however, security-oriented foreign policies of sides toward the Aegean issue have again increasingly begun to take ground. We argue that, first, there has been a shift in Turkish foreign policy toward Greece in general and the Aegean issue in specific from a dialogue-, diplomacy-, and win-win-oriented policy and discourse to security-oriented policy and discourse in last decade, which was the case during the 1990s and before. The struggle between Turkey and Greece to establish and extend their zones of jurisdiction over the Aegean Sea is one of the main reasons for the reescalation of security-oriented policy and discourse between sides. Second, the decrease in the quality and peace of EU-Turkey relations in last decade prevents the EU from playing an active and effective role in the transformation of Turkey's policy toward the issue in accordance with the EU calls and norms, the resolution of issue between two countries through dialogue and diplomacy.

This study, first, introduces the disputes over the Aegean Sea and then both sides' concerns and claims over the Aegean Sea. Second, it analyzes the transformation of Turkey's foreign policy toward Greece in the first half of the first decade of the 2000s. Whether, if so, how and to what extent the EU and its conditionality have played a role in the changes in the traditional Turkish foreign policy toward Greece in this period is analyzed. Third, it examines the changes in Turkish foreign policy toward Greece in general and the Aegean issue in specific in the post-2006 period. By doing so, it investigates how the decrease in the quality and peace of EU-Turkey relations in the post-2006 period played a role in Turkey's security-oriented discourse and policy toward Aegean issue in the last decade.

## 2. The Aegean Issue

Beside the Cyprus issue, the other vital dispute between Turkey and Greece was/is the Aegean issue. The struggle between the Turks and Greeks to establish and/or extend their zones of jurisdiction over the Aegean Sea has continued for centuries. Starting from the taking of Rhodes Island by the Turks (Suleiman the Magnificent) in 1522 to Greece gaining its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1832, the Aegean Sea was totally under the control of the Turks. Then, after Greek's independence and the Balkan Wars (1912), the Turks lost their control over the Aegean Sea and the Greeks established zones of influence over it. Following the signing of the Lausanne Peace Treaty (1923), which established the current Turkish and Greek borders, and the signing of the Treaty of Friendship between two countries in 1930, which lasted until the end of 1950s, there was no struggle between Turks and Greek over the Aegean Sea for over 40 years.<sup>2</sup> However, starting in the early 1960s, especially after the 1974 Cyprus War, the struggle between two countries to establish and extend their zone of influence over the Aegean Sea restarted again<sup>3</sup> and further escalated in the mid-1990s.

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<sup>2</sup>For a detailed account of Turkish-Greek relations of the 1923 and 1954 periods, see Hatipoğlu (1997)

<sup>3</sup>"Because more extensive maritime zones only gained recognition as international legal concepts between the 1950s and 1980s" (European Briefing NO:42, 19 July 2011, pp.2). "The six "maritime zones" defined in UNCLOS include internal waters,

The first dispute over the Aegean Sea emerged in 1974 when Turkey sent an oceanographic vessel accompanied by several warships to explore part of Aegean Sea where, according to the claim of Ankara and Athens, the continental shelf overlapped. Greece sent a diplomatic note to Turkey and sent out a naval force (Heraclides, 2010). In 1976, Ankara sent a seismic ship, also accompanied by a warship, to collect seismic data around Lesbos Island. Greece put its armed forces on full alert. The UK calmed down Athens and Ankara, and then in 1976, Greece applied to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which dismissed the case in 1978, and to the United Nation Security Council (UNSC) which called the two sides together to reduce tension and start a dialogue to solve the issue (UN Resolution 395). Later on, the two countries came close to war again in 1987, when Greece announced it would search for oil in the eastern Aegean, and in 1996, when Greece's parliament gave the government authority to extend their territory from 6 to 12 miles in the Aegean Sea by referring international agreements, including the UNCLOS. In the 121th Assembly (General Assembly of Turkish Parliament, 1995) Turkey reacted to this by declaring that if Greece unilaterally extend its territory beyond the current 6 nautical miles, then it would be considered an act of war. In December 1995, a Turkish bulk carrier ran aground about 4 nautical miles off the West coast of Turkey on the Kardak/Imia islet. Both Turkey and Greece insisted that the ship was in their territory and directed their navies to the islet. Only mediation and diplomatic pressure from the United States prevented a war between two countries at the last minute.

### 2.1. Turkey's and Greece's Concerns Over Aegean Sea

After the Greece-backed coup in Cyprus that was intended to carry out Enosis, which resulted in Turkey's 1974 Cyprus intervention, Greece's anxieties increased regarding the safety of hundreds of its islands in the Aegean Sea located closer to the Turkish mainland than its own. Turkey, on the other hand, worried that Greece might unilaterally extend the width of its territory to 12 miles<sup>4</sup> in the Aegean Sea and establish new maritime and aerial zones of jurisdiction. This would close the corridor through international waters for shipping and would thus prevent Turkey from having access to the Aegean Sea and from ensuring the safety of its west coast (Baslar, 2001). As Davutoglu (2001:170) argued, "Turkey that is shut out from the Aegean and encircled in the south by Greek Cypriots is severely restricted in its access to the outside world." As such, Turkey considered this a threat to its sovereignty on the Aegean Sea and a '*Casus belli*'.

The increasing unfriendly discourse of both sides' elites and politicians after the 1974 Cyprus War increased distrust between two nations. T. Pangalos, the former Greek Foreign Minister, and E. Gonensay, the former Turkish Foreign Minister, both made "degrading" and "hostile" declarations regarding each other and destroyed the foundations of their dialogue by causing increasing distrust and suspicion in both societies toward each other<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, Greece used every opportunity to degrade Turkey in its relationship with the EU, which also further increased suspicion and distrust in Turkish society toward Greece and increased the unfriendly atmosphere between the two countries<sup>6</sup>. In addition to the Cyprus dispute, the treatment of Greek minorities in Turkey and of Turkish minorities in Greece also increased the hostility and distrust between two nations.

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*territorial seas, contiguous zones, exclusive economic zones, continental shelf and high seas. In the context of the Aegean dispute, disagreements have arisen over territorial seas and the continental shelf, with exclusive economic zones potentially constituting a further area of contention" (European Briefing NO:42, 19 July 2011:2).*

<sup>4</sup>Greece argues that according to international law and 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) it has absolute right to extend its territorial seas from six nautical miles to twelve on Aegean Sea. with six nautical miles Turkey has access to the international waters without passing from the Greece territorial waters. But if Greece increased its territorial sea from six to twelve nautical miles the Aegean Sea would be a Greek Lake and Turkey would have to pass Greece territorial water to access international waters and also would close routes of Turkey's main ports of Istanbul and Izmir and Black Sea countries to the Aegean Sea and Offshore, thus Russian is also opposite to that.

<sup>5</sup> see 11 May 1996 Press Statement by the Foreign Ministry of Turkey Concerning the Remarks of T. Pangalos

<sup>6</sup> See Press Release by the Foreign Ministry of Turkey Regarding the Document Distributed By Greece During the EU Ministerial Council Meeting, October 28, 1998.

## 2.2. Greece's and Turkey's Claims Over Aegean Sea

There are many interrelated controversial issues between Greece and Turkey. The delimitation of the territorial waters and national airspace, delimitation of exclusive economic zones, the use of flight information region (FIR), and demilitarization of the Greek islands in Aegean Sea are some of the important of them that need to be solved. Other than the delimitation of the Aegean territorial water, international agreements (including the 1923 Lausanne Convention on the Straits, the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty, and the 1947 Paris Treaty) have stated that these disputes must be settled through bilateral negotiations. Greece, on the other hand, argues that the only dispute in the Aegean Sea is the delimitation of the continental shelf<sup>7</sup> and that settlement must to be through the International Court of Justice (ICJ) (Gross, 1977:59-31). However, Turkey refused to bring the Aegean issue to the ICJ and proposed a direct negotiation for settlement of the issue (Gross, 1977:59-31). Turkey believes that direct negotiations would better protect its rights and support this view by referring to its rights stated in the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty and the 1947 Paris Treaty (Gross, 1977:59-31). Turkey wants the settlement of all interrelated disputes at the same time and also believes that direct negotiations would contribute to the establishment of confidence and friendship between the two sides, leading to compromises from both sides.<sup>8</sup> Until 2002, Greece refused to have direct negotiations with Turkey for settling the Aegean issue. Greece believes that since Turkey has a stronger military, it would gain more rights in the Aegean Sea and that direct negotiations would force Greece to acknowledge the existence of and find solutions for the other interrelated disputes.<sup>9</sup>

## 3. The Impact of EU-Turkey Relations on Turkish-Greek Conflict and Vice Versa

The longstanding conflict between Turkey and Greece, which further escalated and gained an international dimension after Turkey's 1974 military intervention in Cyprus, has affected Turkey's relations with EU, especially after Greece was granted EU membership in 1981. This membership status gave Greece leverage in its dealings with Turkey. By blocking Turkey's relations with the EU, Greece tried to force Turkey to be more open to compromise and to accept Greek claims over the Aegean Sea. Greece was bluntly resisted to Turkey's full EU membership application in 1987 (for details see Güvenç, 1998:99) and also vetoed the finalization of the Custom Union Agreement with Turkey till the EU promised to start accession negotiations with Cyprus in March 1995. During this process (from 1994 to 1995), the release of EU financial aid to Turkey, which was granted as part of the Fourth Financial Protocol, the EU's Mediterranean Programme, and the Matutes Package, was also blocked by Greece till the EU promised to start accession negotiations with Cyprus. The release of EU financial aid to Turkey under the Customs Union agreement with Turkey was similarly blocked by Greece in 1996.

The quality and peace of EU-Turkey relations also affected Turkish foreign policy toward Greece. Turkey made some changes in its traditional Greece policy and made some concessions to Greece to improve its relationship with the EU. To realize the Custom Union, Turkey waived its claim that if the EU advanced its relations with the Greek Cyprus administration as a representative of the whole island and accepted Cyprus into the EU without settlement of the dispute, it would annex the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (Birand, 1996). To be a candidate for the EU, Turkey obeyed the EU (conditionality) and accepted the decision to bring the Aegean dispute to the ICJ if

<sup>7</sup> The Greek Government Spokesman E. Venizelos pointed out that: "Athens firmly believes that the only difference is on the limits of the continental shelf and referring it to the Court in the Hague....Everything else involves unilateral Turkish pursuits, violations of Greek national airspace and the Athens FIR, or violations of international law." Quoted in BBC SWB, EE/2030 B/9 24 January 1994. See also the Speech of Greece's Foreign Minister Papandreou at "Taksim Round Table Meetings", Istanbul, 3 October 1999.

<sup>8</sup> See Press Release Concerning Turkey's Proposal for Comprehensive Peace in the Aegean, 24 March 1996. See also Information Note For Press Concerning the Turkish Peace Initiative of 11 March 1998 in order to Resolve the Aegean Disputes, 12 March 1998.

<sup>9</sup> C. Bikas, the Greek Foreign Ministry Spokesman, "Greece cannot accept talks on all issues because this would imply recognition of the Turkish demands in the Aegean." BBC SWB, EE/2465 B/3, 20 November 1995.

the issue could not be settled through bilateral negotiations. By doing so, it acknowledged the link between the settlement of its problematic relations with Greece and its accession to the EU (See 2000 and 2001 Progression Reports on Turkey and 2001 Accession Partnership Document). On the other hand, as seen in the crisis over the Kardak islet and continental shelf<sup>10</sup> in the Aegean Sea, Turkey took an increasingly hard-line policy toward Greece and froze all of its political relations with the EU as a result of the EU's decision about Turkey's accession at the Luxembourg summit in 1997.

As argued by Diez and Rumelili (2004), Kirisci and Carkoglu (2003) and Uğur (1999) EU's exclusionist policy toward Turkey by referring to its problematic relations with Greece (see the 1997 Luxembourg Summit conclusion)<sup>11</sup> was interpreted as a reflection of EU's reluctance to Turkey's full EU membership. This further solidified a conviction in Turkish society that the EU was an ally of Greece against Turkey, which they called the "Sevres Syndrome"<sup>12</sup>. Hence, Turkey's exclusion from the EU's enlargement process restricts the potential capability and credibility of the EU to make changes in Turkey's Greece policy.

#### 4. Conclusion

The paper investigated the long-standing Aegean dispute between Turkey and Greece and its impact on the EU-Turkey relations and vice versa. It, first, introduced the disputes over the Aegean Sea and then the concerns and claims of Turkey and Greece over the Aegean Sea. Third, it examined the changes in Turkish foreign policy toward Greece in general and Aegean issue in specific throughout the Turkey's EU candidature. By doing so, fourth, it analyzed how the quality and peace of EU-Turkey relations have impacted Turkey's security-oriented discourse policy towards the Aegean issue. The study revealed that the Aegean issue between Turkey and Greece is one of the main obstacles to Turkey's EU accession in the foreign policy realm. It needs to be solved in a peaceful manner for Turkey's EU accession. Until the end of the 1990s, Turkey had followed a security-oriented disengagement foreign policy toward Greece and rejected the linkage between its problematic relations with Greece and EU-Turkey relations. Any attempts taken by Greece administration to make changes in statutes and/or spheres of influence in the Aegean Sea were seen as a reason for war. However, although it is not a part of Copenhagen criteria, the solution of the Cyprus issue and problems with Greece in accordance with the UN resolution was conditioned as a prerequisite by the EU for the development of EU-Turkey relations. Accordingly, Turkey realized that, without having a change in its traditional Greece and Aegean policies in parallel with the UN resolutions and EU demands, it would not be possible to receive a date to start accession negotiations with the EU. In the post-Helsinki process, therefore, Turkey's policies toward Greece and the Aegean issue were opened for discussion in the Turkish society, media and academic society. The security-oriented disengagement foreign policy approach toward Greece and the Aegean issue had gradually lost its ground in the Turkish society and among the policymakers. Thus, Turkey's traditional security-oriented Greece and Aegean policies could gradually be abandoned. The radical change in such policies was realized when Turkey agreed to bring the issues to the ICJ if they could not be settled through bilateral negotiations. However, with

<sup>10</sup> The 1985 Law of the Sea Treaty guarantees states the right to extend their territorial water from 6 to 12 nautical miles ratified by the Greece in 1995. By reference to this international rule Greece tries to extend its territorial waters from 6 to 12 miles in Aegean state. Right after the Greece's that attempt the Turkish parliament ratified a proposal that it would view the extension of Greece territorial water in Aegean Sea from 6 to 12 nautical miles as a 'casus belli'

<sup>11</sup> Such as the EU's announcements that Turkey's problematic relations with Greece and Cyprus negatively affects Turkey's relations with EU (1997 Luxembourg Summit conclusion).

<sup>12</sup> Sevres is a treaty between Allies and Ottoman Empire signed at the end of WWI in 1920, which sought the division of Turkey's territories among ally powers. It created a Greece homeland in the Thrace and the Aegean coast of Turkey and an Armenian state in East part of Turkey. however, As a consequence Turkey's victory against the ally and Greece power in post WWI (1920-1924) it could not be practiced and replaced with the Treaty of Lausanne signed on 24 July 1923. 'Sevres Syndrome' is a term described as an ongoing perception that "there are forces which continually seek to disperse and destroy us (Turkey), and it is necessary to defend the state (Turkey) against this danger" (Akçam, 2001:230), and "the perception of being encircled by enemies attempting the destruction of the Turkish state," (Jung, 2003).

the gradual decrease in the quality and peace of EU-Turkey relations and Turkey's prospect EU membership in the post-2006 period, Turkey has increasingly readapted its traditional security-oriented discourse and policy toward Greece and the Aegean issue. In short, Turkey's problems with Greece in general and its policy toward the Aegean issue in specific have always been brought up in its relations with the EU. When Turkey sees the possibility to realise its prospective EU membership, it calculated the long-term benefits (logic of consequences). The EU's credibility and capability, therefore, increased, which has brought about changes in Turkey's traditional Greece and Aegean policies as seen in the 1995 Custom Union period, 1999 Helsinki Summit, 2002 Copenhagen summit, and the Annan Plan in 2004. However, when the prospects of EU membership was reduced and/or Turkey was treated differently than other applicants and/or candidates, the capability and credibility of the EU to make changes in Turkey's traditional Greece and Aegean policies were reduced and Turkey began to promote a hard-line policy towards Greece and the Aegean issue, as evident in the post-Luxemburg period and nowadays.

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