

Geographical Overview | **EU Mediterranean Countries**

Greek Foreign Policy towards the Mediterranean. Balancing Meets Multilateralism

Panayotis Tsakonas

Professor of international relations and security studies
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
Head of the Programme on Foreign Policy and Security
the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign
Policy (ELIAMEP)

Geographically situated at the intersection of Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Greece occupies a strategic position on the frontier between relative stability and persistent instability. Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, it has been exposed to many of the emerging security challenges affecting the wider Mediterranean region. Today, Greece is among the few European Union Member States located in close proximity to multiple active conflict zones, including the war in Ukraine, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the broader confrontation involving the United States, Israel and Iran. Consequently, Greek foreign policy towards the Mediterranean operates within an increasingly complex, volatile and unpredictable security environment.

This environment is shaped not only by long-standing geopolitical disputes, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the enduring Greek-Turkish rivalry, but also by transnational challenges including Islamist radicalization, international terrorism, irregular migration, climate-related security risks and the illicit trafficking of migrants, narcotics and weapons. The convergence of these challenges has enhanced the strategic significance of the Mediterranean in Greek

foreign and security policy and has necessitated a multidimensional approach to regional engagement. Greek foreign policy has also been formulated within an era increasingly characterized by both “poly-crises” and “perma-crises,” reflecting the simultaneous occurrence of interconnected crises and the persistence of instability over time. As these dynamics have come to define the contemporary Mediterranean security landscape, Greece has adapted its foreign policy to heightened levels of complexity and uncertainty. Particular attention has therefore been devoted to disputes over energy resources and maritime jurisdiction in the eastern Mediterranean, which has emerged as a focal point of Greek foreign policy owing to its significance for national security, regional stability, energy security and geopolitical competition.

The overall outlook for the eastern Mediterranean¹ remains challenging. The region continues to experience significant governance deficits and constitutes one of the most volatile neighbourhoods in the international system. Consequently, the regional security environment retains many characteristics of a “Hobbesian” order, marked by persistent insecurity, geopolitical competition and the absence of effective mechanisms for collective security and conflict resolution. The range of interconnected challenges confronting the region is extensive, including protracted civil conflicts, fragile and dysfunctional states, sectarian tensions, jihadist terrorism, socioeconomic inequalities, democratic deficits, population movements, arms proliferation, enduring regional rivalries, competition over energy resources and the absence of an effective regional security architecture.²

1 The eastern Mediterranean comprises nine states, namely Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, Syria and Turkey.

2 DOKOS, Thanos & TSAKONAS, Panayotis. “Promoting Collective Security Schemes in the Mediterranean.” GOREN, N. (ed.) *The Eastern Mediterranean: New Dynamics and Potential for Cooperation*. Barcelona: IEMed, 2018, p. 12. www.iemed.org/publication/the-eastern-mediterranean-new-dynamics-and-potential-for-cooperation/.

The increasingly assertive policies of regional powers, including Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, further contribute to regional instability. At the same time, developments in neighbouring regions such as the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa and the Horn of Africa, together with the growing involvement of external powers, have further complicated the regional security landscape. The repercussions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have extended beyond eastern Europe, affecting the wider Black Sea region and the South Caucasus, while tensions in the Persian Gulf and renewed hostilities involving Israel and Hezbollah have generated broader implications for regional stability. These developments underscore the growing interconnectedness of security dynamics across the Mediterranean and the Middle East and increasingly shape the strategic environment within which Greece formulates and implements its foreign policy.

Greece's Foreign Policy Priorities in the Eastern Mediterranean

A central objective of Greek foreign policy in the eastern Mediterranean is the enhancement of national security and the consolidation of Greece's regional role within an increasingly volatile and strategically significant Mediterranean environment. The region remains of considerable importance to both Europe and the United States, while simultaneously attracting growing political, economic and security engagement from non-Western powers, particularly China and Russia.

At the same time, Turkey's increasingly assertive policies continue to challenge the existing regional legal and security order. Although Greek-Turkish relations experienced a period of rapprochement following the signing of the Athens Declaration in December 2023, this positive momentum has subsequently encountered renewed tensions. In particular, the re-emergence of the revisionist "Blue Homeland" (Mavi Vatan) doctrine and related claims has revived disputes concerning Greece's sovereign rights in the eastern Mediterranean, as well as questions pertaining to sovereignty over certain islands and islets in the Aegean Sea.

Against this backdrop, concerns persist in Athens regarding the possibility that President Erdoğan's increasingly confrontational rhetoric could be translat-

ed into concrete actions in either the eastern Mediterranean or the Aegean. Consequently, Turkey continues to be perceived as Greece's principal security challenge and remains a primary driver of its foreign and security policy initiatives in the Mediterranean region. Furthermore, the potential interaction between Turkish revisionism and the broader spectrum of emerging threats and vulnerabilities characterizing the contemporary environment of "poly-crises" and "perma-crises" further complicates Greece's strategic calculations. Under these conditions, Greek foreign policy is increasingly required to maximize its diplomatic, political and strategic resources in order to address its longstanding security concerns while simultaneously responding to new forms of instability and geopolitical uncertainty across the wider Mediterranean region.

Devising a "Mediterranean Strategy"

Greek foreign policy seeks to develop a strategic approach capable of responding to the defining characteristics of the contemporary Mediterranean security environment, including geopolitical rivalry, revisionist tendencies, heightened volatility and growing uncertainty. To this end, Greece's policy towards the Mediterranean rests on two complementary pillars. The first involves the adoption of balancing and deterrence-oriented initiatives vis-à-vis neighbouring Turkey, with the aim of safeguarding national interests and preserving regional stability. The second focuses on strengthening existing multilateral frameworks and promoting new forms of regional cooperation in order to address shared challenges, including insecurity, energy security, irregular migration and the consequences of climate change. At the same time, Greece's emerging "Mediterranean strategy" is informed by a number of broader foreign policy principles. The first is that of active diplomacy, which emphasizes proactive engagement and the anticipation of regional developments rather than reactive policy responses. The second is multifaceted diplomacy, reflecting an approach that extends beyond traditional state-to-state relations and incorporating a wider range of diplomatic instruments, including public diplomacy and engagement with non-state actors. The third is a sustained commitment to international law, particularly the principles and

norms governing interstate relations and the peaceful resolution of disputes.³ Taken together, these principles seek to enhance Greece's credibility, predictability and diplomatic effectiveness within the Mediterranean region. They also provide the foundation for Greece's efforts to position itself as a constructive regional actor capable of maintaining dialogue with diverse stakeholders while contributing to regional stability, cooperation and conflict management.

Pillar I: Developing "Hard" and "Soft" Balancing Policies

The first pillar of Greece's Mediterranean strategy combines "hard" and "soft" balancing policies vis-à-vis neighbouring Turkey. The objective is to influence Turkish behaviour by increasing the political, diplomatic and strategic costs of revisionist actions while discouraging practices perceived as undermining regional stability and the existing legal order. A key feature of this approach is the preference for indirect balancing through international institutions, diplomatic coalitions and multilateral frameworks. By combining deterrence with concerted diplomacy and institutional engagement, Greece seeks to shape Turkey's strategic calculations while avoiding the costs of an exclusively military response and promoting the peaceful management of disputes in the eastern Mediterranean.

Specifically, Greece's "hard balancing" approach encompasses selective defence modernization efforts aimed at maintaining a credible deterrent capability, combined with the cultivation of strategic partnerships with key regional actors, including Israel and Egypt, as well as pro-Western Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In parallel, Greece has actively promoted a network of trilateral and multilateral cooperation schemes involving countries of the eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf region, including Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jor-

dan and the UAE. These partnerships serve not only to strengthen regional stability and security cooperation but also to enhance Greece's strategic position within the wider Mediterranean. Significantly, this approach is reflected in the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Strategic Plan 2024-2027, which identifies the promotion of good neighbourly relations in the eastern Mediterranean, the resolution of bilateral issues with neighbouring states and the management of diplomatic challenges through adherence to international law and international agreements as a central pillar of Greece's foreign policy strategy.⁴

In addition to its policy of limited hard balancing, Greece also pursues a range of "soft balancing" strategies. These primarily involve supporting Turkey's European orientation by linking elements of the European Union's positive agenda – such as the modernization of the Customs Union and enhanced cooperation on migration – to specific conditions. Such conditions may include the abandonment of the *casus belli* against Greece and the acceptance of the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice in The Hague for the peaceful settlement of disputes. Increasingly, Greek policymakers appear to recognize the limitations of the routine use of low-cost vetoes and to acknowledge that, provided appropriate conditionality is maintained, a closer relationship between Turkey and the European Union may serve both Greek and broader European interests. This assessment has gained further relevance in light of the evolving security challenges and regional instability associated with the ongoing tensions and conflicts involving Iran and the wider Middle East.⁵

Pillar II: Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Promoting New Multilateral Schemes

A second pillar of Greece's Mediterranean strategy focuses on strengthening regional cooperation and supporting multilateral initiatives aimed at enhancing

3 Minister of Foreign Affairs George Gerapetritis' speech at the "Kyklos Ideon" think tank Conference, Athens, 7 November 2023 (available at: www.mfa.gr/en/minister-of-foreign-affairs-george-gerapetritis-speech-at-the-kyklos-ideon-think-tank-conference-athens-07112023/).

4 *Strategic Plan 2024-2027*, Directorate for Strategic and Operational Planning, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hellenic Republic, October 2023, p.5 (available at: www.mfa.gr/images/docs/Strategic%20Plan%202024-2027_EN.pdf).

5 The EU's adoption of a strategy of "conditional engagement" of Turkey is undoubtedly in Greece's interest. In fact, a similar strategy was adopted by Greece vis-à-vis Turkey in the late 1990s with the aim of bringing Turkey into the European integration orbit while giving equal attention to deterrence and hedging against the possibility that a strong Turkey might challenge Greek interests. See TSAKONAS, Panayotis. *The Incomplete Breakthrough in Greek-Turkish Relations. Grasping Greece's Socialization Strategy*. New York: Palgrave, 2010.

stability, security and prosperity across the wider Mediterranean region. In pursuing this objective, Greece has consistently sought to reinforce its role in the eastern Mediterranean while contributing to the formulation of both European Union and United States policies towards the region. To this end, Greek foreign policy has actively supported major institutional frameworks developed since the end of the Cold War, including the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Barcelona Process), the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue. More recently, Greece has contributed to the development of EU and NATO policies towards the Southern Neighbourhood and has participated actively in maritime security initiatives and naval operations, including Operations IRINI and ASPIDES. Greece has also played an active role within the MED9 (EuroMed 9), the informal grouping of nine Mediterranean EU Member States that coordinate positions on issues of common interest within the European Union. Through this framework, Greece has advocated a more comprehensive European approach to migration management, arguing that the Mediterranean Member States should not be viewed merely as the Union's external border guardians but as strategic actors whose concerns require a broader political and policy response.

Furthermore, Greece has promoted cooperation between the OSCE and its Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation, participated in regional initiatives such as the Mediterranean Forum and the Olive Group and assumed a leading role in the Mediterranean Component of the EU Water Initiative (MED EUWI). Through these activities, Greece seeks to strengthen existing mechanisms of regional cooperation while

fostering new forms of collaboration, dialogue and policy coordination across a wide range of sectors, including security, migration, environmental sustainability and resource management.⁶

More importantly, Greece has sought to complement its balancing policies vis-à-vis Turkey with multilateral initiatives designed to enhance regional stability and institutional cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean. This approach is consistent with one of the core objectives of the first pillar of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Strategic Plan 2024-2027, namely "strengthening national security through the promotion of bilateral partnerships, strategic alliances and *new multilateral frameworks in the wider eastern Mediterranean region*"⁷ (our emphasis). In this context, Greece has supported proposals for the establishment of a "Multilateral Conference on the eastern Mediterranean," originally advanced at the European level, aimed at addressing maritime delimitation disputes alongside broader issues such as energy security, migration and regional stability.

For Greece, such an initiative offers several strategic advantages. First, it would embed regional disputes within a rules-based multilateral framework grounded in international law, including the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Second, it would enable Greece to play an active role in shaping the agenda and institutional architecture of such a process. Finally, it would provide an opportunity to integrate existing bilateral maritime delimitation agreements concluded with Italy and Egypt, as well as ongoing discussions with Libya, into a broader multilateral framework of regional cooperation.

6 "Mediterranean." Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hellenic Republic (available at: www.mfa.gr/en/foreign-policy/regional-policy/mediterranean/).

7 *Strategic Plan 2024-2027*, op. cit., p. 8