

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ORDER

BRIDGING DIVIDES: BERLIN'S DIPLOMATIC ROLE IN GREEK–TURKISH RELATIONS

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January 2024



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BRIDGING DIVIDES: BERLIN'S DIPLOMATIC ROLE IN GREEK–TURKISH RELATIONS

CURRENT STATE OF GREEK–TURKISH RELATIONS

The date 7 December 2023 deserves special mention in the history of the Greek–Turkish conflict. As part of a summit meeting planned to the smallest detail, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan agreed to put bilateral relations on a new footing. The politicians pledged to do this in an "atmosphere of friendship and mutual trust", as stated in the Athens Declaration on Friendly Relations and Good Neighbourliness.

President Erdoğan arrived with a large entourage and a group of ministers. In addition to the Athens Declaration, which can be described as a declaration of intent and a binding orientation for the further development of bilateral relations, the governments signed agreements in several areas, such as trade, energy, education, agriculture, technology and tourism. Erdoğan declared that "we want to turn the Aegean into a sea of peace and cooperation", a fine-sounding statement that the Greek public apprehended with a mixture of approval and incredulous astonishment.

The *Reuters* news agency described the tête-à-tête between the Greek Prime Minister and his Turkish guest at the foot of the Acropolis as a "remarkable love fest without precedent".

It is significant that the new climate is not limited to the extraordinary rhetoric produced by both sides. One Greek observer pointed out that there has not been such a long period without incident in Aegean airspace since the 1980s. Erdoğan's subsequent declaration that "air battles over the sea" should come to an end confirms this politically significant development.

But the Greek public must first get used to the Turkish President's new way of addressing the country. There has been much discussion of whether Ankara's new policy is a tactical maneuver or a strategic shift.

It should be noted that both sides, regardless of their fine-sounding statements, have gone on record as declaring that they will not depart from their known stances on the central issues of the conflict. In substance therefore Turkey's positions have changed as little as those of Greece.

The success of the Athens meeting lies in the far-reaching agreements on conflict settlement procedure, a code of conduct and a detailed roadmap regarding how to improve bilateral relations.

A lot of work awaits diplomats and politicians in the coming months and years. In the end, it will be the politicians who put the seal of approval on the results negotiated behind closed doors. Convincing the public (and the opposition) of the usefulness of an agreement will be another challenge, especially in Greece, as the fierce domestic political controversy over the agreement reached in the dispute over the name of North Macedonia illustrates.

FAVOURABLE CONDITIONS

The circumstances in which Athens and Ankara might try to achieve tangible results are more favourable in the current phase of détente than they have been for a long time. This is firstly because of the domestic political situation in both countries and secondly because of the geopolitical situation in the wake of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kyriakos Mitsotakis have both been strengthened domestically following their respective election victories in the first half of 2023 and now have multi-year mandates. The political process is also being helped by the improved mood in each country towards its neighbour in recent months. The main catalyst for this psychologically significant development were the devastating earthquakes in Anatolia in February 2023, and the subsequent extraordinary solidarity shown by Greece and the Greek people in Turkey's hour of need. So-called "earthquake diplomacy", sometimes referred to as "earthquake diplomacy 2.0" – alluding to the precedent of 1999 – paved the way for a new start in bilateral relations.

Finally, international factors also play a role. Since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, NATO unity has been an absolute priority for the West. An open conflict between NATO partners Greece and Turkey would be a political disaster for the alliance – it would play directly into the hands of Putin's Russia. Preventing this from happening is a strategic goal of the

West. In coordination with the United States Berlin adopted the political mission of ensuring that Greeks and Turks resolve their problems peacefully. "The Americans want us to take care of it", said a leading German diplomat in the region¹.

TURKEY'S POLICY ADJUSTMENTS

The fact that the governments in Athens and Ankara are now celebrating friendly exchanges and good neighbourly relations is primarily the result of a change in Turkish rather than Greek foreign policy. In recent years, Athens has repeatedly pushed for a political process. Calling for dialogue with Ankara is a constant in Greek policy towards Turkey. However, Ankara has repeatedly undermined the search for amicable solutions at the negotiating table through behaviour that has been described as "provocative" and "aggressive" and not only in Greece.

The last time this happened was in May 2022, when without warning President Erdoğan put the talks with Athens on ice: "There is no longer anyone called Mitsotakis in my book. I will never accept meeting with him [again]", Erdoğan said on Turkish television. The Turkish President's undiplomatic volte-face was triggered by the Greek Prime Minister's speech to both houses of the US Congress. Without mentioning Turkey by name, Mitsotakis had called on the senators and congressmen not to lose sight of stability in the eastern Mediterranean when making decisions regarding arms deliveries. It is an open secret that Athens has always kept a wary eye on American arms deliveries to Ankara.

The severing of relations was followed by a "hot summer": "Five-year record with 7671 violations (of airspace) in nine months" read the headline in Athens daily *Ta Nea* in mid-October 2022, referring to the sharp increase in flight maneuvers by Turkish fighter jets over and near Greek islands. Ankara's sabre-rattling was accompanied by open threats of war. Erdoğan's words still ring in the ears of many Greeks: "One night we will come without warning." The Turkish President has used this phrase before, for example, in the run up to military operations in Syria and Iraq.

The situation on the south-eastern flank of the Western alliance was so tense in the second half of 2022 that – once again – international crisis diplomacy was initiated. Germany played a leading role in this and not for the first time.

THE CHALLENGE OF MAINTAINING A BALANCE

"Even the smallest spark can lead to a catastrophe", said German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas during his shuttle diplomacy trip to Athens and Ankara in August 2020. Tensions had been triggered by Turkish natural gas explorations off Greek islands in the eastern Mediterranean. Rival military maneuvers by Greece and Turkey helped to aggravate the situation.

In this politically heated atmosphere, Athens formally called on the German government to impose an arms embargo on Turkey. The focus was on six submarines that were assembled in Turkey with the significant involvement of ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems. The delivery of the components had been approved in 2009.

Berlin did not comply with the Greek request: "Strategically, I don't think this is the right way to go", said Foreign Minister Maas in an interview at the end of 2020. "We have already seen NATO partner Turkey simply buy missiles from Russia because it could no longer get them from the USA."

The submarine issue led to a major diplomatic upset in German-Greek relations. The Greek media relentlessly portrayed the arms deal as evidence of Berlin's partisanship with Ankara.

But that is in the past: "The show is over", said a German diplomat at the beginning of 2022 concerning the submarine issue. One senior member of the SPD parliamentary group has said that "there's not a chance in Hell that Chancellor Scholz will undo existing treaties [with Turkey]".

During the German-Greek meeting of foreign ministers in Athens in summer 2022, Greek host Nikos Dendias raised the issue once again. Since then, the submarines have, as far as is known, disappeared from the agenda of German-Greek consultations.

For German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, preventing an escalation in the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean – or to put it more positively, achieving lasting détente between Athens and Ankara – remains a major goal of German foreign policy. "Good, neighbourly relations between Greece and Turkey are important not only for both countries but for Europe as a whole. The German government is committed to ensuring that the outstanding issues between the two countries are resolved through dialogue and based on international law", said the Chancellor in a newspaper interview on the occasion of his visit to Greece at the end of October 2022. Addressing Ankara, the Chancellor added, without mentioning Turkey by name: "It is not acceptable for one NATO partner to question the sovereignty of another. This also applies to veiled military threats."

The Chancellor was referring not at least to the numerous verbal threats that Erdoğan has often directed at Greece personally. These have had a toxic effect on Greek-Turkish relations in tandem with the simultaneous violations of sovereignty over the airspace of the Aegean Sea.

¹ In addition to publicly available sources from Germany, Greece, Turkey and other international media, I am quoting from background discussions with senior German diplomats in Berlin and the region. They have asked not to be named.

In these circumstances, Berlin sided with Athens on a number of occasions. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's statement, made during her visit to Athens in July 2022, attracted considerable attention on both sides of the Aegean: "Greek islands are Greek territory and no one has the right to question that."

The minister's rhetoric met with little enthusiasm in Turkey (which she visited after Athens). Ankara's foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu complained that Berlin appeared to have lost its objectivity in the bilateral conflict: "Germany has acted as an honest mediator in the past. It took a balanced approach, but lately, we see that this balance is, unfortunately, being lost."

The Turkish minister's complaint points to German policymakers' strategic dilemma in the current phase of Greek–Turkish relations. On one hand, Berlin wants to act as a mediator and is therefore obliged to remain neutral. On the other hand, Berlin should show solidarity with Athens, not least because of their common membership of the European Union.

Ernst Reichel, German ambassador in Athens, described the resolution of this dilemma in the following terms: "The more threatening the rhetoric from the East [in other words Turkey] and the more openly the Turkish government questions Greek sovereignty, the clearer Berlin's rejection of these stances becomes."

Examples of such "rejection" can be found in the aforementioned statements by the Foreign Minister and the Federal Chancellor during their talks in Athens in July and October 2022, respectively. Olaf Scholz is known for his reticence, but what little he does say carries all the more political weight. In June 2022, he condemned Turkish fighter jets' violations of Greek airspace over the Aegean islands through his spokesperson: "Invading Greek airspace and flying over Greek islands is not okay; it seems counterproductive and against the spirit of the alliance."

A Federal Foreign Office spokesperson was much more specific, announcing in early October 2022 that it was the unified stance of the German government (and the European Union) that "the agreement concluded in 2019 regarding the maritime borders between Turkey and Libya is not in line with international law".

A leading German diplomat in the region repeated in a background interview that the Turkish–Libyan memorandum is "clearly contrary to international law". The agreement should have been agreed with all neighbouring countries, including Greece, which did not happen. The same diplomat then said of Berlin's role: "If we tell the Turks that they are in the wrong, we achieve exactly the opposite in Ankara and exacerbate the crisis." Public scolding of Ankara therefore remained exceptional during the period under review.

SUCCESSFUL DIPLOMACY BEHIND THE SCENES

Berlin's visible efforts to strike a balance, which have been criticised in Greece as a "policy of equidistance", have been accompanied by diplomatic action behind the scenes. The effectiveness of political mediation away from the headlines was demonstrated in December 2022, when leading diplomats from Greece and Turkey met in Brussels at Germany's initiative and agreed to resume the frozen dialogue. Jens Plötner, the Chancellor's foreign and security policy advisor, pulled the strings on the German side. Plötner, who has excellent connections in the region as a former ambassador to Athens, succeeded in bringing to the table Anna-Maria Boura and Ibrahim Kalin, two key figures in their respective governments' foreign policy decision-making: Ms Boura is, like Plötner in Berlin, a foreign policy advisor to the Greek Prime Minister, while Kalin held the same position in the Turkish presidential palace at the time.

With hindsight, the German mediation in December 2022 can be described as the initial spark for a process that gained momentum in the wake of the devastating earthquakes in Anatolia, with the revival of earthquake diplomacy in February 2023, and led to a new phase of détente between Greece and Turkey.

The highlight of this process, which was initiated with Berlin's help, is the Athens Summit in December 2023 with its forward-looking agreements.

GERMANY'S INTERESTS IN THE REGION

As Europe's leading economic power, Germany is traditionally interested in stability. Southeastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean are of particular strategic importance to Germany. The war in Ukraine has increased this importance even further. Greece and Turkey can be described as frontline states in this war. Their cooperation, indeed active involvement in NATO activities strengthens the West. This is another reason why Berlin is interested in a lasting de-escalation.

Germany plays a key role in the EU. Nevertheless, the interests of the EU and Germany are not entirely congruent when it comes to Turkish–Greek relations. Here, the EU cannot act as a neutral mediator – which Berlin offers itself as – because Greece and Cyprus are members, while Turkey is not. As is well known, Ankara has no say in Brussels and rejects a stronger role for the EU in Greek–Turkish affairs. This is what the government in Nicosia is demanding.

Turkey continues to pursue rapprochement with the EU – President Erdoğan regularly reiterates Ankara's desire for full membership. The prospects of this seem remote under the current political conditions. Ultimately, a solution to the Cyprus issue will be key to the normalisation of relations between the EU and Turkey.

BERLIN AND THE CYPRUS ISSUE

The unresolved Cyprus issue can be described as the "mother" of Greek-Turkish conflicts. Whether and to what extent this international conflict, in which the United Nations has played a key role since the early 1960s, should be put in a political context with the purely bilateral differences between Athens and Ankara is a question as old as the Cyprus problem itself. Even though there may be talk on various occasions of a "decoupling" or exclusion of the Cyprus issue from the agenda of Greek-Turkish diplomacy, there is agreement on both sides that a final and lasting understanding between the neighbouring states must include a solution for Cyprus.

Not least against this backdrop, it is reasonable that Berlin's mediation efforts not be limited to the Greek-Turkish disputes in the narrower sense. The main issue here is the disputed demarcation of sovereign rights between Athens and Ankara in the Aegean and parts of the eastern Mediterranean. That said, Cyprus has also become a focus of German foreign policy. In recent years, there has been a noticeable intensification of high-level political exchanges between Berlin and Nicosia. Cypriot President Anastasiadis, Foreign Minister Kasoulidis and, shortly afterwards, his newly elected successor as president, Christodoulidis, visited the German capital in quick succession.

"Germany stands firmly by your side", Annalena Baerbock promised her Cypriot counterpart in January 2023. "A two-state solution for Cyprus is out of the question", the German minister emphasised. The Federal Chancellor sent a similar message during the visit of Cypriot President Christodoulidis at the end of May 2023: "Germany continues to support a solution in which Cyprus becomes a federal state with two zones and both ethnic groups are represented in the leadership of this state. The basis for this is the resolutions of the United Nations."

This was followed by the Chancellor's offer that Berlin could contribute its "good offices": "Germany stands ready to help everyone regain trust in each other. If desired, we are also happy to support the negotiation process." During the press conference with the Cypriot President, the German Chancellor added that "it is quite clear that the challenges facing Cyprus can only be solved in good cooperation with Turkey".

The current deadlock in international Cyprus diplomacy, which has been in an impasse since the failure of the last concerted UN mediation in 2017, is an indication that any efforts made by Berlin have failed to produce results. Positions on the island have hardened: while the Greek Cypriot side, and the Republic of Cyprus, are pushing for a revival of the UN process, Ankara and the Cyprus Turks are consistently demanding the recognition of a two-state solution.

Meanwhile, German policy has focused on containing the conflict over the maritime zones, after Ankara caused new tensions by sending a research vessel into areas claimed by Cyprus. Importantly, Berlin's intervention was not without effect: in an interview with *Deutsche Welle* in January 2023,

Cypriot Foreign Minister Kasoulidis described the effectiveness of Berlin's influence on Turkey with a clarity that is unique in this context:

Germany is in a position to talk to Turkey on a friendly, give-and-take basis. Germany has proven that. I won't go into details, but Turkey did not encroach into the Cypriot EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) in 2022. Nor did Turkey take any new actions in Varosha, although the Turkish and Turkish Cypriot sides had announced this. The fact that none of this happened in 2022 is partly due to Germany.

The fact that Berlin can exert a moderating influence on Turkey was confirmed shortly afterwards by Cypriot President Christodoulidis at the joint press conference with Olaf Scholz in Berlin: "I know for a fact that this country [Germany] has played a decisive role both in the problem between Greece and Turkey and, as in our case, in the violations regarding the Exclusive Economic Zone. Germany's role was decisive in putting a stop to this."

OUTLOOK

In the years 2020 to 2023, Germany played a major role in Greek-Turkish relations. Berlin's mediation efforts failed to resolve the conflicts, some of which are decades old. Given the political and geostrategic situation, this would also be an unrealistic expectation. Nevertheless, Berlin's political interventions played a decisive role in preventing the major crises in 2020 and 2022 from getting out of hand. "Whenever things threaten to get out of control, we get restless," says a senior German diplomat – and proactive, it should be added.

In Germany's foreign policy, the Greek-Turkish issue occupies a comparatively prominent position and repeatedly pre-occupies senior staff – and the top leadership - in both the Foreign Office and the Federal Chancellery.

Despite the change of government in Berlin in 2021, German policy on Greek-Turkish issues has not changed, with minor differences in style and the tone of external communication: "Our policy has remained unchanged over the years", says a senior official at the foreign ministry. For good reasons, the German government is "positively excited" to quote Andreas Kindl, the German ambassador to Athens, given the latest signs of détente in Greek-Turkish relations. Nevertheless, Berlin is aware that a quick solution cannot be expected to the complex differences in the Greece-Turkey-Cyprus crisis triangle. "It may take decades", said one senior German diplomat.

"In the meantime, we have to make sure that they don't shoot at each other."

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This policy paper explores Berlin's pivotal involvement in Greek–Turkish relations since 2020. Following years of tension, relations have entered a new phase of détente, culminating in the landmark Athens Summit of December 2023. The paper emphasises Turkey's foreign policy adjustments as a key catalyst in the current rapprochement. The significance of the "Athens Declaration" is underscored, along with the domestic and geopolitical conditions that have fostered the positive shift. Examining Germany's role as a mediator, the paper navigates the delicate balance between neutrality as a necessary condition for successful mediation and solidarity with EU-partner Greece, which found itself

confronted with open threats and transgressions on the Turkish side. The author then discusses Berlin's discreet mediation, which brought the two parties back to the negotiating table after a period of tension in late 2022. Finally, the paper examines Germany's policy towards Cyprus. While this has not made any tangible contribution towards a solution to the Cyprus question, Berlin has been effective in reducing tensions between Cyprus and Turkey in their dispute over maritime zones. Acknowledging the complexities of the Greece-Turkey-Cyprus crisis triangle, the paper highlights Germany's pledge to prevent armed conflict and foster stability in the region.