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COMMAND LIVE NEWS NETWORK

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Issue 12

The Headlines of Today. The Battles of Tomorrow.

Est - 2016

'Blue Homeland' vs. 'Greek Lake'



A HAF Mirage 2000 BGM.

Long simmering tensions between Greece and Turkey now threaten to explode into outright conflict in the Aegean.

In early May 2020 a video surfaced of an aerial engagement over the Aegean Sea - with a Turkish Air Force F-16 caught in a Greek Air Force Mirage 2000 gunsights. The Mirages had reportedly intervened as these Turkish F-16s had allegedly been

buzzing a helicopter carrying the country's defence minister - which had been flying over Greek islands in the eastern Aegean.

While the HUD tape may appear these aircraft were engaged in a real dogfight, at least one analyst noted that the lack of a radar lock on the Turkish F-16, along with it popping no flares trying to escape, indicated a lower level of aggression in this

encounter and perhaps even unwritten 'rules' to reduce the risk of an accidental. These aerial provocations have resulted in several dogfights between Greek and Turkish fighters over the years, beginning from 1974 during the Turkish invasion of Cyprus when two Turkish F-102s were destroyed by two Greek F-5s with several losses - including a midair collision in 2006.

A long history

This latest encounter over the Aegean thus has long history as the location of territorial disputes between Greece and Turkey, which twice in 1987 and 1996 has almost resulted in outright conflict between the two countries. In particular, the claims and counter-claims are exacerbated by the geography of

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Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2 Flagship Greek Frigate HS Spetsai in the Red Sea .

the region, where a multitude of small islands make for a highly complex issue in how sovereign air and sea borders are defined by international rules. Turkey for its part, sees Greek islands close to its coastline as encroaching on its territory, some less than 3 miles away, while Greece fears that Turkey will extend its sphere of influence into the centre of the Aegean, cutting off these islands.

What is difficult for perhaps outsiders to grasp, is that both countries are members of NATO and therefore allies - despite this

tensions. In fact it is a testament to NATO that its structure has allowed both countries - when insiders speak of meetings where one or the other will walk out if the other is present, or language in official statements has to be very carefully chosen to avoid ruffling feathers - to both remain valued members of this military alliance.

However, in recent times these arrangements are in danger of breaking down as geopolitical shifts upend traditional alliances and assumptions. While

NATO has stood with the US in the global war on terror since 9/11, the winding down of the war in Afghanistan and the US focusing on domestic politics and a retreat from internationalism has allowed a power vacuum to develop - with Russia and China only too happy to step in and sow discord.

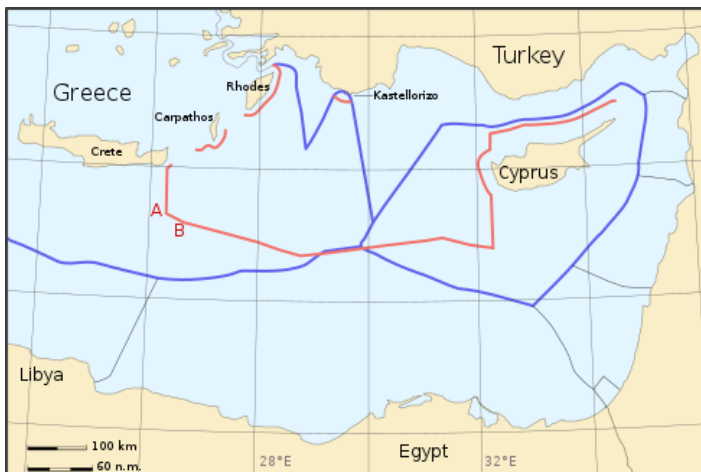
The signs have been present since the civil war in Syria erupted - after interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the West was reluctant to be dragged into any new 'regime change' adventure. It was only the emergence of ISIS and and Russia's intervention to propping up Assad's regime, that prompted the US and West to finally take action - although this fell short of actual regime change.

Since then, the geopolitical situation has become even messier - with the US, having defeated ISIS, pulling out to leave its Kurdish allies in northern Iraq and Syria to their fate. Turkey, meanwhile, has gone from shooting down a Russian Su-24 Fencer in 2015, to cosying up to Moscow in order to secure an advanced S-400 SAM system in defiance of the US and

NATO. Greece, meanwhile, is still dealing with the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and almost had its own 'Grexit' from the EU in 2015. The human tragedy in Syria has also added an extra element - that of refugees wanting to head for Europe via the EU's southern states. This has given Turkey extra leverage in controlling the flow of migrants.

What this means then, is that for any potential Greek-Turkish confrontation in the near future, there is no longer the strong international leadership provided by the US to exert pressure to solve crises at the diplomatic level before they spiral out of control. The global worldwide pandemic of 2020, also means that the US and other countries are mainly concerned about national health issues, rather than on picking up signals of an impending military clash - especially between two NATO partners.

In the latter part of 2019 there Turkey stepped up its campaign to claim to some of these islands as its 'Blue Homeland' - aiming to divide the Aegean in half. In November 2019 Ankara lodged official claims of Exclusive



Eastern Mediterranean EEZ conflicts.

“ Greece continues to field modern and sophisticated air and sea forces - including over 150 F-16s, Mirage 2000s and a handful of F-4E Phantoms upgraded to PI-2000 standard - as well as four Embraer E99 AEW aircraft. ”

Economic Zones (EEZ) with the UN in these contested waters.

This is not just a case of obscure legal wrangling over the national ownership of continental shelves – but rights to exploit vast natural resources oil and gas in the region – which could transform the fortunes of the first country to claim them. Oil and gas fields in the vicinity of Cyprus, for example, have the potential to provide all of Israel’s gas needs for the next 40 years. Meanwhile in 2019, Greece itself licensed oil exploration south east of Crete.

For this region of scattered smaller islands, if conflict did erupt, it would primarily be a air and sea clash. Let’s take a look at the forces available.

Greek order of battle

Although hard hit by the financial and debt crisis of 2008-10, Greece continues to field modern and sophisticated air and sea forces - including over 150 F-16s, Mirage 2000s and a handful of F-4E Phantoms upgraded to PI-2000 standard - as well as four Embraer E99 AEW aircraft. For the short ranges involved in this theatre, air-to-air refuelling is

not needed. The Greek Air Force also boasts an impressive line-up of precision weapons, including the Scalp cruise missile, Exocet and US JSOW to give it stand-off strike capabilities. The Air Force also operates the country’s SAM network, which is an odd mix of western mainstays like HAWK, Patriot, Crotale-NG and vehicle-mounted Stingers as well as some eastern-origin hardware such as mobile SA-8s and, most interestingly, a lone S-300PMU-1 battery - the latter inherited from the Greek Cypriot Government in the 1990s.

Despite its financial constraints, Greece is still aiming to acquire Lockheed Martin F-35 stealth fighters at some point in the future in a \$4bn deal for 24 fighters. With Turkey currently cut off from F-35 deliveries, Athens sees the acquisition of F-35s as necessary to keep the balance of power with Turkey - especially after the acquisition of the deadly S-400 SAM system.

Its Navy relies on German-supplied diesel submarines, frigates and fast attack boats - configured for operations in the littoral waters. However the last large surface combatant was delivered in 1998 and the financial



crisis has put a dent into modernisation plans. Uniquely too for a NATO nation, the Navy also operations four large Russian-designed Zubr assault hovercraft for amphibious operations. In air assets the Navy also operates S-70B Aegean Hawks and for P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft.

Finally, while the Greek Army is likely to play a supporting role to air and sea forces, it does contribute Apache attack helicopters as well as Kiowa Warriors. These helicopters would be certain to be useful in defending small islands.

Turkish firepower

Turkey is one of the strongest NATO powers in terms on troops under arms and sheer numbers, with a strong and capable air force. In the Cold War, its role would have been to have protected NATO’s southern flank with its

vast army.

The Turkish Air Force boasts 245 F-16s - the third largest operator of the Viper after the US and Israel, as well as around 32 F-4E Phantom ‘Terminator 2020.’ - which are able to carry a wide range of US precision weapons. The Air Force has an impressive EW and ISR capability with over 100 MALE UAVs, along with four Boeing 737 AEW&C and two platforms assigned to EW. The air force has a substantial tactical airlift fleet with nine A400Ms and also operates seven KC-135 tankers for power projection.

Turkey has also worked to develop its own indigenous aerospace and defence industry - developing its own precision munitions like the SOM air-launched cruise missile, UAVs, trainer aircraft and attack helicopters. It is also pushing ahead with development of its own stealth fighter. This gives it a degree of



F-4E Phantom ‘Terminator 2020’.



SOM cruise missile mockup on MSPO 2014.

self-reliance in arms -as well as bringing in cash through the export of these weapons.

In early 2020 it also pioneered what might be thought of as the first-ever close air support campaign by drones - using armed UAVs against Syrian ground forces in response to a Syrian air attack that killed 34 Turkish soldiers.

However, the attempted coup in 2016 against President Erdogan has reportedly had negative effects on Turkish air power - with air force officers

imprisoned for their part in the coup. Indeed, some analysts speculate that the controversial acquisition of a Russian S-400 SAM system, in defiance of the US, has more to do with protecting the President from an internal coup from the air force, than Greek air strikes.

This decision to press ahead with the Russian S-400 has also disrupted Turkish Air Force fighter modernisation plans, with deliveries of the F-35 being halted by the US and the country kicked out of the programme.

Since then, news reports have linked Turkey with a possible purchase of Russian Su-57 stealth fighters - an acquisition that is likely to strain relations with the US even further.

In naval forces, Turkey's navy (like Greece's) is equipped with German-built diesel submarines for the shallow waters in which they operate. It also fields 16 frigates, (half of these being modernised ex-US Oliver Hazard Perry class), ten corvettes and 19 fast attack craft as its main surface combatants. Under



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

construction at the moment is the Anadolu, which is set to be an amphibious warfare/helicopter carrier. In air assets, the Turkish Navy operates S-70 Sea Hawks, AB212 helicopters as well as six fixed-wing maritime patrol aircraft.

Aviation assets fielded by its army includes drones, the T-129 ATAK attack helicopter and the Israeli-built Harpy loitering munition.

Summary

Until now then, these disputes over territory integrity in the Aegean Sea have simmered along at a low-level, despite the occasional alarming mock dogfight than turns deadly - in a stable balance of power. A degree of risk that accidents will happen has been accepted by both sides with each probing each others reactions and readiness.

However, the abdication of the US in its traditional global leadership role, means that there is now more potential for the escalation of these minor incidents into major flashpoints. Absent US international pressure, there is also the scope today for the 'weaponisation' of social media and 'fake news' by external actors hoping to drive a wedge between and split the NATO alliance wide open.

The final factor assessing the likelihood of sabre-rattling turning hot is the absence of meaningful stakes - or a big enough prize that would persuade each side to go to war. That there are islands in the Aegean are disputed and represent national sovereignty is not in doubt - but there are also 'grey zones' of undetermined sovereignty for uninhabited outcrops and islets. Where exactly is the threshold for conflict for these claims? What therefore, could not be ignored is something like the invasion of a populated island, a strike on a military facility, a massacre of refugees or discovery of natural resources (oil, gas) in contested areas that would threaten to upset this balance of power and provide the trigger for conflict.