

# Reflections of Türkiye-Greece Tension in the Sea of Islands on the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Security Complex



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how Türkiye has made the problem in the Sea of Islands a security issue in its recent foreign policy, the policies of Türkiye and Greece towards the Eastern Mediterranean region, the attitudes of non-regional actors towards the parties, and the reflections of the tension between the two countries in the region with the Copenhagen School's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) approach and process tracking method, which has an important place in security studies. Since they are perceived as a threat to the sovereignty of Türkiye, these issues are a problem of belonging and armament of the islands in the Sea of Islands, whose status has not been determined by international agreements. Greece's efforts to expand its territorial waters are based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which Türkiye is not a party. Greek policies shaped within the framework of the Seville map, and the effect of foreign actors, have created regional complex formations studied by excluding Türkiye. It is considered unacceptable for Türkiye to remain silent in the face of threats against it, to accept the demands dictated to it, and to compromise its national interests. Increasing uncertainty in the region, polarization, and the race for regional militarization bring the risk of open conflict. This situation creates a serious security threat in the Eastern Mediterranean Region Security Complex.

**Keywords:** Eastern Mediterranean, islands issue, militarization, Regional Security Complex Theory, security hazard

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## Introduction

DISPUTES BETWEEN TÜRKİYE AND GREECE in the "Sea of Islands" on the continental shelf, territorial waters, and the sovereignty of the unassigned islands show their impact at the regional and international levels. Although the problem is experienced in the Sea of Islands, it is also related to the Eastern Mediterranean region. For this reason, the question "Is the island problem between the two countries only related to the security of the two countries, or could it cause a serious problem for regional security as well?" is the main focus of this study. The approach of Türkiye and Greece to the problem in the Sea of Islands further deepens this problem.

According to Türkiye, the problem is the

conflict in the maritime jurisdiction, the problem of who owns the islets and reefs whose status quo is unclear, and Greece's arming of the islands whose legal status has not been decided yet. According to Greece, the only reason for the problem is Türkiye's refusal to accept Greece's maritime jurisdiction and occupy the Greek continental shelf. Greece, which wants to receive a share of the energy resources discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean and take an active role in an energy corridor that can be created, aims to solve the continental shelf problem by squeezing Türkiye into a narrow maritime jurisdiction area. However, a solution formed in line with the demands of Greece means that Türkiye renounces its territorial waters border of 104 thousand square kilometers along the Sea of Islands and the Eastern Mediterranean.

This would leave Türkiye with only 41 thousand square kilometers of maritime jurisdiction in the Sea of Islands and Eastern Mediterranean (Çetin, 2020; Kadan, 2020).

Greece's increasing relations with Israel and other countries in the region, the increasing presence of the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (USA) in the region and the reflection of pragmatic alliances formed on the economic ground in the military field through military exercises and similar initiatives has left Türkiye geopolitically besieged and exacerbated the perception of threat. This situation caused Türkiye's foreign policy to turn into the diplomacy of deterrence. The fact that both sides look at the problems from different perspectives has led to the inability to produce constructive solutions with concrete steps despite the calls for dialogue. This situation further increases the tension in the region. Although the problem in the Sea of Islands occurs at the regional level, it directly affects the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Complex and brings with it the risks of active conflict. While Türkiye stated that Greece is ignoring calls for dialogue and taking more provocative actions instead of a solution-oriented attitude, Greece emphasizes that Türkiye threatens them with war. In fact, in the letter sent by Greece to the United Nations (UN), the EU, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Greece stated that President Erdoğan stated warlike rhetoric Greece with these words "We may come suddenly one night" (Haber Global, 2022).

An active conflict situation between the two countries has the power to affect the whole region. At this point, actors such as the Atlantic system, the UN, and the EU may suffer from this conflict. This situation will lead to a security crisis that is exceedingly difficult to repair in the Eastern

Mediterranean. In this study, the background of the issue in the Sea of Islands between Türkiye and Greece and the arguments put forward by Türkiye and Greece will be discussed by addressing the variable geopolitical dynamics of the Eastern Mediterranean region and the attitudes of non-regional actors. Solutions will be suggested by applying the process follow-up method within the framework of the RSCT.

### **Regionalism and Regional Security Complex Theory**

Regions and regionalism are interconnected norms in terms of international relations, intertwined to better explain world regional politics by narrowing borders. Traditionally, regions and regionalism has been developed by groups, states, and empires that shape history under the influence of historical, political, economic, military, and geographical factors. Some significant developments in history - wars, alliances, treaties, and trade routes - have contributed to this development, as have these actors in history. Understanding the international system and its subsystems and analyzing the regions as a unit is one of the most complicated things in international relations. For this reason, the necessity of examining the world by dividing it into regions and subsystems has emerged.

Many theories have influenced studies about regions, regionalization, and regional security. In the field of old regionalization theory, attempts have been made to explain the regionalization process with theories such as functionalism, neo-functionalism, regional economic integration, and neo-realism (Breslin & Higgott, 2000, p. 334). According to the old regionalism, regions were necessarily created to cope with the global challenges posed by the bipolar Cold War conditions

(Hettne, 2002, p. 326). According to Buzan, regions are regional security complexes combined with mutual security issues (Buzan, 1983). In this respect, ensuring security is the primary concept of new regionalism, which emerged as the third wave of regionalization after the Cold War, representing a much more dimensional form of integration. It connects national and international factors, political and economic factors, and state and non-state actors by building regional theory into the discipline of international relations more successfully (Gürcan, 2010, pp. 21–22; Kelly, 2007, p. 198; Vayrynen, 2003, p. 27).

### **The Regional Security Complex Theory, developed by the Copenhagen School, is one of several new theories associated with the new regionalism.**

The Regional Security Complex Theory, developed by the Copenhagen School, is one of several new theories associated with the new regionalism. This theory was developed by Barry Buzan (Buzan, 1983, 1991; Grabowski, 2020). The concept was later conceptually expanded by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde (Buzan et al., 1998) and then Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (Buzan & Waever, 2003). The regional security complex is based on variables and regional dynamics such as intense conflict-cooperation dynamics, the concepts of friendship and enmity, interdependence, geographical and historical proximity, geopolitical rivalry, and fear factor in which two or more states are mutually affected. It also discusses whether ethnocultural and religious ties can be determining factors in determining

security complexes (Stivachtis, 2021).

In the early 1990s, the Copenhagen School defined the security complex as “A group of states whose security perceptions and security concerns cannot be considered independently of each other”. After adopting the securitization concept in 1995, it defined “The securitization and desecuritization processes as units that cannot be considered independently of each other”. The RSCT is partially borrowed from security theory. It is argued that the dependence on security in the complexes stems from the securitization of neighboring states (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 44). According to the Copenhagen school, which also studies desecuritization along with securitization theory, the main goal is not to securitize an issue but to desecuritize it (Buzan, Wæver ve Wilde, 1998:1). While securitization is the legitimate measure taken when there is a threat to the reference object, desecuritization is the loss of its securitization status or the politicization of an issue (Hansen, 2012, p. 526).

According to Buzan, security is a relational phenomenon, with the national security of all states in the system interconnected by a network of interdependence. Security and insecurity are associated with proximity, as political and military threats are more intense at close ranges than at long distances (Söderbaum & Shaw, 2003). When it comes to regional security, the region, shaped by mutual dependence, power distribution, history, perceptions of friendship and hostility, fear, and regional dynamics, creates a more intense and high-level diplomacy between the states. According to Buzan, the concepts of friendship and enmity cannot be connected only to the balance of power because there are issues such as ideology, region, ethnic lines, and historical precedent that can affect these feelings (Buzan, 2007).



2022 Blue Homeland exercise of the Turkish Naval Forces Command.  
(Turkish Naval Forces Command, 2022)

Another essential factor is fear. Regional Security Complex Theory, both old and new, emphasizes geography first. It is based on the basic idea that threats have the most significant impact in geographically neighboring areas. Therefore, states fear the intentions and powers of neighboring states. The main level of security analysis is the regional level (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 3). Due to the fear factor, the states in the regions are highly interconnected. In regional security, there is higher security dependency between states. For this reason, it is necessary to analyze the entire region as a unit to understand the security problems (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 41).

A complex is formed between at least two sovereign states interacting with each other. The borders of the complex are formed based on the states' security policies. These borders

can be changed by states that interact or do not want to interact with each other. Complexes can be structured in diverse ways, depending on the distribution of power among states and the degree of friendship and enmity between them (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 53). Depending on the degree of friendship and enmity, complexes can be divided into three types: conflict formation, security order, and security community. When problems cannot be resolved under appropriate conditions, it creates an environment of conflict. Therefore, in conflict complexes, states perceive each other as possible threats and do not respect each other as sovereign entities (Frazier & Stewart-Ingersoll, 2010). In the security order, the potential risk of conflict and fear of war continues. However, these conflicts can be overcome with diplomatic solutions. The

rivalry perceptual is intense rather than the hostility perceptual between states. The level of cooperation between states in these complexes is relatively high. In security communities, however, states do not expect such conflicts to arise. If a problem arises, solutions to problems are developed within the framework of mutually determined rules and diplomacy (Buzan & Waeber, 2003, p. 174).

### **The Eastern Mediterranean as a Security Complex**

The Eastern Mediterranean region, which has a rich accumulation in line with the historical, cultural, economic, geographical, and political elements it contains, has had a central (superior) function on East-West trade, transportation, migration, and energy transmission routes throughout history. The Eastern Mediterranean carried the wealth of the East to the West (Özekin, 2020, p. 11). It is important to reevaluate the region, which has such strategic importance, and the developments in today's conjuncture. This study will examine the reflections on the problem between Türkiye and Greece on the Eastern Mediterranean security complex in terms of geographical proximity, power distributions, friendship, band hostility perceptual, fear factor, and regional conjuncture. According to the RSCT, complexes are categorized as conflict, security order, and security community. It is seen that the Eastern Mediterranean security complex continues to turn into a conflict complex due to the unresolved problems between Türkiye and Greece. At this point, factors such as geographical proximity, hostility, fear, and threat perception impact the formation of the complex.

### **Geographic, Geostrategic and Geopolitical Elements Defining the Eastern Mediterranean**

The Eastern Mediterranean is a region drawn east of the line between Cape Bon in Tunisia and Cape Lilibeo at the tip of Sicily Island. It is surrounded by the coasts of Albania, Croatia, Slovenia, Italy, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lebanon, Palestine, Montenegro, Greek Cypriot Administration (GCA), Greece, Syria, Israel, Egypt, Libya, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Türkiye and Tunisia (Yaycı, 2020, p. 12). The United Kingdom, which has the status of a guarantor country like Greece and Türkiye in Cyprus, also has a coast in the Eastern Mediterranean because the Akrotiri and Dhekelia bases are sovereign territories (Kansu, 2019, p. 60, 2020). The Eastern Mediterranean region is at a critical point at the junction of the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, due to its geographical and geostrategic location as well as its political and economic characteristics.

The Eastern Mediterranean basin appears to function as a gateway that opens from Mesopotamia and Central Asia via Türkiye and Syria to the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf via the Suez Canal (Kütükçü & Kaya, 2016, p. 88). The Eastern Mediterranean basin is in a geostrategic position regarding Middle Eastern and European connections. It is connected to the Marmara Sea by the Dardanelles Strait and to the Red Sea by the Suez Canal, containing the Adriatic Sea, the Ionian Sea, and the Aegean Sea. It is located on the trade routes connecting the east and west of the world. In this way, it is a critical position in the logistics of energy and commercial goods from the Middle East, India, and the Pacific oceans to Europe (Duman,



2021; Ozan, 2019; Şemşek, n.d.; Yaycı, 2012). In addition, the fact that the island of Cyprus, which has strategic importance in maritime transit transport, is in the Eastern Mediterranean region increases the region's importance even more.

In the Mediterranean region, which covers only 1% of the world's seas, 15% of global maritime transport occurs (WWF, 2021). The Eastern Mediterranean acts as a locomotive in the Mediterranean region, where an enormous international maritime trade and energy flow takes place (Gürcan, 2021). The grounding of the cargo ship *The Evergreen* due to a sandstorm on 24 March 2021 in the Suez Canal, which joins the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean, once again emphasized that the Suez Canal is of critical importance for global shipping and supply lines. Approximately 12% of global trade and 30% of global container traffic, an estimated 7-10% of world oil, and 8% of

liquefied natural gas pass through the Suez Canal (New Zealand Embassy in Cairo, 2021; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2021).

With the increasing need for energy after the industrial revolutions, fierce competition for hydrocarbons has led to the redistribution of world energy resources starting from the end of the 19th century. In this race, keeping oil-rich geographies such as the Middle East under control and delivering the oil in the region to the world market has become the primary motivation of the great European powers (Gibson, 2019). During the Second World War, the Eastern Mediterranean attracted the attention of the Axis powers with its geographical proximity to the Middle East, North Africa, and the Caucasus oil. The Eastern Mediterranean played a vital role in defending NATO's southern flank throughout the Cold War.

In the last 20 years, the hydrocarbon reserves

discovered in the region have significantly changed the Eastern Mediterranean's energy geopolitics. Since the second half of the 2000s, the discoveries made by the countries that are neighbors in the Mediterranean and some international oil companies offered the Eastern Mediterranean region the opportunity to become a potential energy production center and energy corridor (Özekin, 2020). The existence of hydrocarbon resources under the seabed has led the countries in the region to declare their continental shelf an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and to accelerate exploration and drilling operations in these zones. On the one hand, regional and non-regional states' involvement in sharing resources and maritime areas has further intensified the competition and conflicts in the region. On the other hand, energy discoveries have brought about considerable changes in the region's geopolitics and created a fragile foundation that endangers the countries' security in the region, especially Türkiye (Gürcan, 2019; Gürcan, 2021).

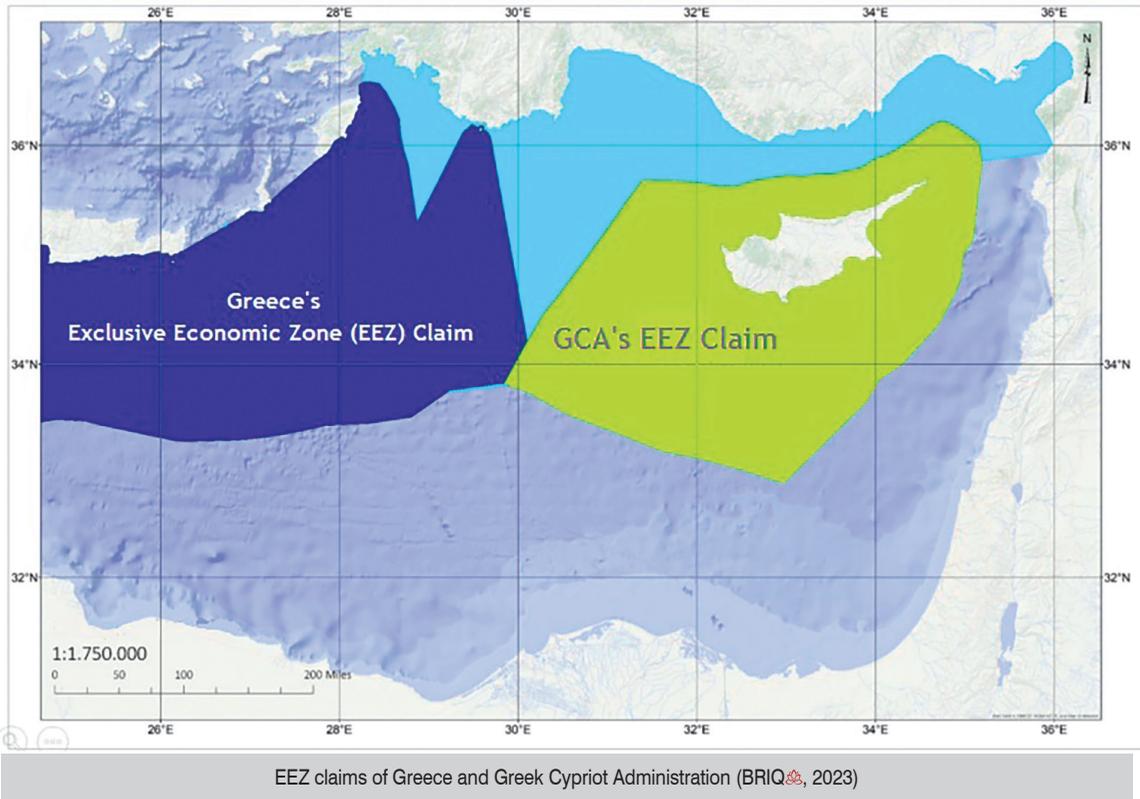
### **Geopolitical Dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean**

It is still unclear whether the energy resources discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean are a great opportunity or a big threat to the region's countries and regional security. While initially discovered energy sources were expected to encourage regional cooperation, they can also exacerbate regional conflicts. It was expected that the energy resources on issues such as the determination of exclusive economic zones among the riparian states of the Mediterranean and

the Cyprus problem would create a basis for reconciliation. Contrary to this, the situation further deepened existing problems. While it is expected to contribute to the formation of the regional security complex and encourage economic partnerships, regional cooperation has begun to evolve into political and military alliances.

**The rapidly increasing uncertainty in the region and the regional militarization race bring the risk of open conflict.**

The rapidly increasing uncertainty in the region and the regional militarization race bring the risk of open conflict. The developments that led to the further increase of insecurity and instability in the region are as follows: conflict over the energy resources discovered in the region, maritime delimitation disputes, the Cyprus issue, the island problem between Türkiye and Greece, the war in Syria, the Israeli-Lebanese border conflicts, the intensification of regional conflicts, the rapid militarization of the region, regional political uncertainties, and Türkiye's new foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in response to the perception of regional encirclement towards Türkiye (Bilgin, 2012; Işeri & Bartan, 2019; Paikin & Rose, 2021; Stergiou, 2019; Tagliapietra, 2013; Tziarras, 2019). However, some countries try to create the perception that Türkiye is implementing an expansionist policy, and Ankara is trying to control the trade routes on the Black Sea and Suez Canal with the Blue Homeland Doctrine.



Four dynamic elements play a key role in today's Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics, shaping the regional security complex that has come to the fore (Tziarras, 2021, p. 5). The first of these is the energy resources discovered in the region. Recent hydrocarbon discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean are one of the main drivers of this region's shifting geopolitical and security dynamics. This situation can also create a driving force for regional economies. Many experts have discussed this issue extensively (Adamides & Christou, 2015; Gürel et al., 2013; Proedrou, 2012; Tziarras, 2016, 2018). The energy resources discovered so far are in small quantities and are not game-changing on a global scale. Nevertheless, the Mediterranean's hydrocarbon reserves are considerable. However,

it should not be forgotten that these energy resources, initially seen as an opportunity to solve political conflicts and regional problems, have deepened the controversy rather than contributed to regional stability.

The second is geopolitical antagonisms and new balances of power (Tziarras, 2021, pp. 6–7). Energy became another point of contestation between traditional and contemporary geopolitical rivals in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially between Türkiye and countries such as Cyprus, Greece, Israel, and Egypt. In addition, Türkiye's historical problems with Cyprus and Greece and deteriorating relationships with other countries in the region have aggravated geopolitical antagonisms. Türkiye's problems with the region's countries and fluctuations

in cyclical relations, the convergence of other regional countries due to their common economic and energy interests, and their exclusionary initiatives against Türkiye from regional cooperation have triggered regional dynamics. Trying to exclude Türkiye from regional cooperation and the reflection of this pragmatic alliance shaped on economic grounds in the military field through military exercises has intensified Türkiye's perception of geopolitical siege and threat (Akbayır & Savaş, 2021; Özekin, 2020; Yılmaz, 2020). This situation causes the deterrence diplomacy in Türkiye's foreign policy to increase, making the political situation enter a vicious circle by escalating regional tensions further.

### **China has developed a strong interest in the Eastern Mediterranean as part of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative.**

The third is the increasing interest of foreign powers in the region. The investments of French, Italian, American, and Qatari companies in the natural gas reserves located on the continental shelves of Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt have brought regional issues to the international level. The military presence of the American, Russian, British, and French navies in the region causes a multidimensional and global problem in Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics (Demiryol, 2020; Lika, 2020). The USA, which has become the world's largest natural gas producer with shale gas production, wants to export its energy resources to many parts of the world,

including Europe, with the LNG method and to continue its military and intelligence activities in the region (Kedikli & Çalağan, 2017). The EU countries are developing solutions on how to overcome the energy crisis. The EU's interest has once again turned to the Eastern Mediterranean. The UK takes an active role in the region with its guarantor status on the island of Cyprus, its military bases where it collects military intelligence, and the British BP company. China has also developed a strong interest in the Eastern Mediterranean as part of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Gürcan, 2021).

The fourth is the new human security imperative associated with the region's geopolitics and balance of power, which goes beyond traditional security concerns. The global powers, who found nation-states to be anti-democratic, supported the destruction of nation-states in the Middle East and North Africa and the establishment of small new states based on sects, ethnic origins, and micro-nationalism. This way, these new states can be more easily governed from the outside (Özdemir, 2020; Tziarras, 2021). Libya, Iraq, and Syria were divided by foreign intervention. After the overthrow of the dictatorial governments in the region, local power wars based on sects and ethnic origin began. With the emergence of ISIS brutality in the vacuum created by the powerful states of the region and the world taking sides instead of putting out the fire, there was a significant humanitarian crisis (Gürcan, 2020; Karbuz, 2021). The events and their reflections in the Middle East region have caused major social, economic, security, and humanitarian concerns in several Arab countries, particularly Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria (Acer, 2019; Kansu, 2020).



1958 Geneva Convention on the Law of the Sea.  
(Law Encyclopedia, 2019)

In addition, a new humanitarian crisis occurred when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. Human security challenges related to national security have become the center of international discussions and cooperation efforts since the mid-2010s. The Eastern Mediterranean region also suffers from this human security problem. Problems such as conflicts, wars, political instability, unresolved political and diplomatic problems, terrorism, regional armament, and refugee crises threaten regional security.

### **Türkiye-Greece Tension and its Regional Reflections**

As mentioned above, the region should be examined as a single system in regional security theory. The region is a historical, cultural, and economic transition point. Cultural differences, religious differences, historical conflicts, and

chronic problems cause the relations between the regional states, Türkiye and Greece, to be strained from time to time and the possibility of conflict to arise. Regarding the security complex, some fundamental issues need to be examined to understand the causes of tension and the possibility of conflict. These are geographical conditions of the regional security complex, historical perception of friend-enemy, sovereignty status of the region, geopolitical fear, and threat factors. Under this title, the Türkiye-Greece tension in the Sea of Islands is discussed from a geographical point of view.

About 1800 pieces of land are in the Sea of Islands (Mansel, 2004, p. 3). Only twenty-four of them are bigger than one hundred square kilometers. In total, about a hundred of them have been inhabited. In terms of examining these islands, we can analyze them in three groups:

a) On 24 April 1830, with the independence

of Greece from the Ottoman Empire, the islands whose sovereignty was transferred to the Greek side,

b) Islands transferred to Greece in return for non-militarization (non-military status) with the Treaty of Lausanne on 24 July 1923 and the Treaty of Paris in 1947,

c) Islands, islets, and rocks whose sovereignty is not determined by international treaties (Fuat, 2013, p. 53).

Islands' issues have not been determined by international agreements and have remained uncertain. In addition to their military importance, the energy reserves discovered in the Mediterranean and the Sea of Islands increase their importance. On the islands whose status was not determined after the Treaty of Lausanne, Greece claims that Türkiye renounced its sovereign rights in all the unnamed islands based on Article 16 of the Lausanne Peace Treaty (Ferudun, 2009, p. 86). Türkiye states that the islands' sovereignty has not been transferred and that it has full rights in the islands. Türkiye has not given up its claims on these islands. While Greece also claims that the 1932 Italian-Turkish Agreement is an international treaty, it says that the Turkish side renounced all the islands in the Menteşe Region. Türkiye, on the other hand, states that it is not an internationally binding agreement in terms of registration, signature, and entry into force (Ferudun, 2009, p. 60).

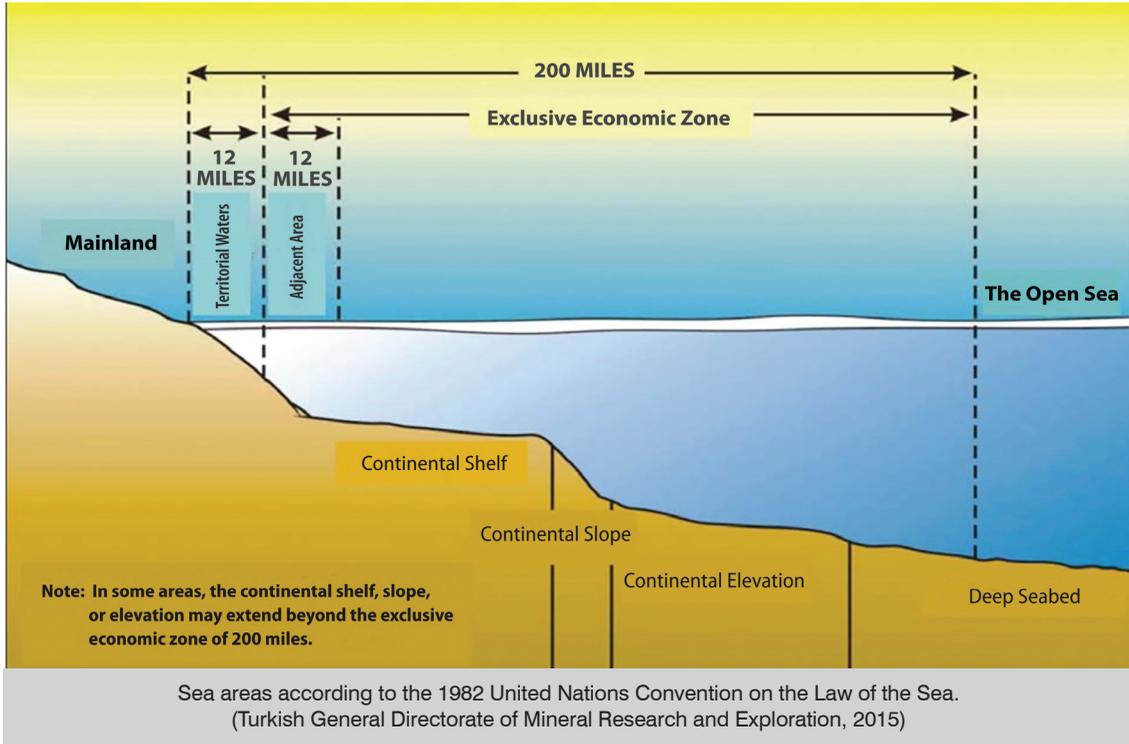
Uncertainty about the status of islands and rocks in the Sea of Islands raises sovereignty disputes over the boundaries of the continental shelf and EEZ. The concept of the continental shelf first emerged as a legal concept in a declaration by United States President Truman in 1945 (Ertuğrul, 2017a, p. 42). Continental shelf status was determined in the 1958 Geneva Convention.

It states that coastal states have rights in waters up to 200 miles deep, and everything on the sea and seabed belongs to the coastal state (Gökdemir Işık, 2009). The 1958 Geneva Convention was replaced by the 1982 UNCLOS. Türkiye has not signed either treaty. The most crucial principle in determining the boundaries of the continental shelf in the Law of the Sea is the necessity of determining the rights equally and neutrally.

An equitable solution in the Sea of Islands, based on the closeness of the islands to the continent, does not seem possible now because most of the islands are closer to the Türkiye's land border than Greece's land. The states in the 1982 UNCLOS, of which Greece is a party, have agreed "to limit their territorial waters to 12 miles" (Ertuğrul, 2017b). Based on this convention, Greece wants to extend its territorial waters to 12 miles, claiming that its islands have a continental shelf and EEZ rights. However, Greece's extension of its territorial waters to 12 miles is an attack on Türkiye's sovereign rights in a semi-enclosed sea like the Sea of Islands. According to international law, both states must agree on mutual territorial waters borders. No state can cut off the exclusive economic zone from which the other state reaches the open sea. The right to access the high seas is protected in the 1958 Geneva Convention and 1982 UNCLOS (Mengi, 2008).

### **The Process of the Türkiye-Greece Conflict**

According to the Lausanne Peace Treaty, Türkiye has sovereignty over the islands up to three miles off Anatolia (İnce, 2013, p. 121). As mentioned in the previous section, regarding the sovereignty of islands, islets, and rocks of the unnamed islands, status quos have not



been determined in this treaty with the “Law on the Determination of the Border of the Greek Territorial Seas” dated 17 September 1936 and numbered 230. Greece declared that it had increased territorial waters from 3 miles to 6 miles, violating international law (Özman, 1988). In response to this, Türkiye increased its territorial waters to six miles with the “Territorial Waters Law” dated 1964 and no 476 (Kanunlar, 1964, p. 49). With Greece’s signing of the 1982 UNCLOS and the 12-mile claims coming to the agenda, Türkiye renewed its view on territorial waters with the “Territorial Waters Law No. 2674” dated 20 May 1982. According to the law:

“Article 1 – Turkish territorial waters are included in the country of Türkiye. The width of Turkish territorial waters is six nautical miles. The President of the Republic is authorized to determine the width of territorial seas over

six nautical miles for certain seas, considering all the features and situations related to those seas and complying with the principle of equity. Article 2 – Territorial seas are limited by agreement between Türkiye and States with adjacent or reciprocal coasts. This agreement can be made by the principle of equality and by considering all relevant characteristics and situations of the region. Article 3 – The width of the territorial sea is measured from the baselines to be determined by the President. Article 4 – The waters on the land side of the main lines and the gulf waters are Turkish inland. Permanent port facilities are considered part of the coast, and the landward waters of the most exposed of these facilities and the outer ports are included in the inland waters” (İncekaş, 2021; Karasuları Kanunu, 1982, p. 338).

On 1 June 1995, the Greek Parliament

approved the UNCLOS. As we mentioned above, based on the phrase “The maximum territorial water of a country is 12 miles” in the contract, after announcing that it would increase the territorial waters border of the Sea of Islands to 12 miles later, the Turkish Parliament issued a declaration on 8 June 1995 (Yücel, 2010, p. 91). As stated in the declaration:

**While Türkiye is trying to maintain the balance in Lausanne in a peaceful way, Greece is displaying an aggressive stance to expand its dominance over the sea.**

“Greece has finally put forward its willingness to extend its territorial waters to 12 miles by taking advantage of some provisions of the Law of the Sea Convention, mainly determined for the high seas and oceans. If this happens, Greece will have placed about 72 percent of the Aegean Sea under its sovereignty. It is unthinkable for Türkiye - a peninsula- to accept such a situation that will lead to access to the open seas and oceans through Greek territorial waters. Türkiye has vital interests in the Aegean. The Turkish Grand National Assembly hopes that the Greek Government will not decide to extend the territorial seas in the Aegean beyond 6 miles in a way that would upset the balance established with Lausanne. In the event of such a possibility, it has decided to give the Government of the Republic of Türkiye all powers, including those deemed necessary in military terms, to protect and defend the vital interests of our country, and to announce this situation to the Greek and world public opinion with friendly feelings” (Tezkereler ve Önergeler, 1995, p. 136).

Subsequently, the crisis known as the “Kardak Crisis” emerged. On 25 December 1995, the Turkish ship “Figen Akat” landed on the Kardak rocks near the island of Kalimnia (Berberakis, 2021). The Greek Coast Guard offered assistance on this rock, one of the undetermined cliffs, and the ship requested assistance from the Turkish Coast Guard, stating that the rock was in Turkish territorial waters. After mutual information, the ship was brought to Turkish ports by 2 Greek trailers due to the diplomatic efforts between the countries on 28 December. However, on 25 January 1996, a nationalist Greek Priest in Kalymnos planted the Greek flag on the rocks. On 30 January, this situation brought mutual military moves that would bring the risk of military conflict to the next level. With the engagement of US President Bill Clinton on 31 January, the formula “No flags, No ships, No troops” was applied. According to this formula, all flags, ships and soldiers will be withdrawn (Berberakis, 2021; Koulizakou, 2017).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye has divided the problems experienced in the Sea of Islands with Greece into five headings: “a) Maritime jurisdiction, including the territorial sea and the continental shelf and the delimitation of these areas, b) The demilitarized status of the East Aegean Islands within the framework of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the 1947 Paris Treaty, and other relevant international documents, c) Legal status of some geographical formations, d) Greece’s claiming that its national airspace is 10 nautical miles wide in violation of international law and abuse of Flight Information Area (FIR) responsibility e) Search and Rescue Activities (SAR)” (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Başkanlığı, n.d.).



### Recent Developments Affecting the Crisis

While Türkiye is trying to maintain the balance in Lausanne in a peaceful way, Greece is displaying an aggressive stance to expand its dominance over the sea. Worried about Türkiye becoming an international power in the short term and aware of the increasing power of Türkiye not only in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean but also in the common seas, Greece continues its provocative actions with the support of the USA and some EU countries (Çaylak, 2022; Milliyet, 2022; Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Greece works to create international public opinion on issues such as the status quo of the islands, the ownership of the islands, the armament of the islands, and the Cyprus problem. It pursues

a discriminatory and exclusionary policy through the provocative actions, statements, regional trade, economic, military, and energy cooperation it continues to engage in (Akbaşır & Savaş, 2021; Özekin, 2020; Yılmaz, 2020).

The mutual EEZ borders in the Eastern Mediterranean have yet to be determined fully according to international public opinion. There is a dominance that Greece is trying to impose in the region through both the islands and the GCA, of which it is the guarantor. Within the framework of this dominant area, the first problem in the Eastern Mediterranean emerged in 2003 with the agreement of the Greek Cypriot Administration to determine the maritime areas with Egypt (Kökyay, 2021). Although countries sign an agreement to

establish mutual EEZ borders with bilateral agreements in the Eastern Mediterranean, this may not be accepted by all countries in the region (Acer, 2021, p. 21). The understanding of regional security tells us that the region should be analyzed as a unit. A situation that not every country accepts in the region harms mutual trust and cooperation. In terms of the countries in the region, Türkiye has officially objected to the maritime border agreements between the Egypt-Greek Cypriot Administration (2003), Greek Cypriot Administration of Cyprus-Lebanon (2007), Israel-Greece (2010) and Egypt-Greece (2020). Greece-Syria and Egypt objected to the (2019) agreement signed between Türkiye and Libya (Acer, 2021, p. 21).

### ***Seville Map***

The Seville Map, allegedly prepared by Professor Juan Luis Suarez de Vivero from the University of Seville in 2001 at the request of the EU, for the settlement of the EEZ dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean between Türkiye, Greece and Cyprus, was prepared to form the basis of its claims on the subject. This map, which has the characteristics of the second Treaty of Sevres, means nothing to Türkiye (Gürdeniz & Yayıcı, 2020; Önder & Kılıç, 2021, p. 58). EU officials declared that the EU did not prepare the Seville map, and it was stated by the US Embassy in Ankara that the Sevilla map is a document without legal status. “Maritime jurisdiction areas must be decided upon by agreement between the relevant states following international law. In addition, the EU does not consider the Sevilla

map as a legal document.” However, Greece continues to maintain its claims on this map to create international public opinion (BBC News Türkçe, 2020; Çetin, 2020; Önder & Kılıç, 2021, p. 60).

On the map that defends the Greek theses, there is the proposition that the Greek islands have a continental shelf and can form an EEZ. Based on this, Greece has determined the maritime borders of Çoban, Kaşot, Rhodes, and Meis islands, starting from the island of Crete. The island of Meis, 2 km from Anatolia and 580 km from the Greek mainland, was accepted as the middle line (Türkeş, 2021, p. 24). By accepting this line as a coast, Greece is trying to confine Türkiye to a narrow area in the Eastern Mediterranean. This map is intended to usurp Türkiye’s 104 thousand square kilometers of sea area and to make Türkiye content with only 41 thousand square kilometers (Çetin, 2020; Kadan, 2020).

Accepting Meis Island as a midline harms equality and equity in the region. First, the internationally accepted understanding is “The continent dominates the sea area”. International law has not seen any contrary decision (Türkeş, 2021, p. 99). Secondly, according to the decisions of the International Court of Justice, the islands on the opposite side are those that are close to the mainland of the other state, not the state they are affiliated with (Kütükçü & Kaya, 2016, p. 87). When a middle line is drawn between Türkiye and Greece in the Sea of Islands, the islands claiming to form a continental shelf stay on the side close to Türkiye. The claim that these islands have a continental shelf is incompatible with the norms of international law (Türkeş, 2021).



The map of Turkish Blue Homeland. (Yaycı, C., 2020)

Islands on the “reverse line” cannot have a continental shelf other than territorial waters and cannot create any restrictions (Gökdemir Işık, 2009; Mengi, 2008; Özman, 1988). The decision of the International Court of Arbitration on Channel Islands such as Jersey, Guernsey, and Alderney between England and France is an example of this (Sali, 2022, p. 50; Delimitation of the Continental Shelf between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the French Republic (UK, France), 1977). Third, this map hinders Türkiye’s right to access the high seas. According to the International Law of the Sea, the right of access to the high seas of countries cannot be denied. The Seville map and Greece theses imprison Türkiye in the Antalya and Iskenderun ports and block them from reaching the high seas

(Türkeş, 2021, p. 99). A statement saying that the Seville map usurped Türkiye’s rights came from Michael Tanchum, a professor at the University of Navarra in Spain, whose expertise is in the Middle East and North Africa. In his article for Foreign Policy magazine, he stated that Türkiye was right to oppose the Seville map “Since Türkiye has not signed the UNCLOS, it cannot file a lawsuit against Greece and Southern Cyprus. For this reason, it cannot base its claims on legal grounds.” (BBC, 2020; Tanchum, 2020).

### ***Blue Homeland Doctrine***

Cem Gürdeniz, inspired by Atatürk’s command, “I order you not to attack, but to die” during the Dardanelles War, argued that the

defense of the homeland should begin in the Blue Homeland. The term “Blue Homeland” was used for the first time in the “Black Sea and Maritime Security” symposium on 14 June 2006. This concept, created by Cem Gürdeniz, has been defined as a recipe that Türkiye will take and examine in case of any geopolitical problem. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated, “We will protect the Blue Homeland with the same determination as we tore up the Sèvres agreement, which aimed to destroy our homeland a century ago.”

### “There is no issue on Sea of Islands. There are only Greece’s demands”

At the symposium on the Eastern Mediterranean held in 2020, Erdoğan called on Istanbul and Marmara University and instructed that a map which is against the Seville Map. The map, published as a book with the title “Blue Homeland “One Map, One Doctrine” and Türkiye’s National Pact in the Seas”, was prepared by Rear Admiral Cihat Yaycı and published by Istanbul University. This study is shown as a reflection of Türkiye’s policy towards its marine areas. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan emphasized that Türkiye’s official thesis reflects the Blue Homeland Doctrine, with these words: “We continue to protect our rights and interests in our seas, with a strong will and unwavering belief, with the awareness of how important it is to defend the Blue Homeland” (Gürdeniz & Yaycı, 2020; Yaycı, 2022).

Plans for the Middle East’s petroleum and Eastern Mediterranean gas to bypass Türkiye and move to Europe via Greece pose a major

threat to Türkiye, which claims to be an energy transmission hub. At the same time, preventing Türkiye from reaching the high seas and requiring the permission of Greece, even for the Navy at the Iskenderun Port to go as far as the Dardanelles, is a national security issue and is unacceptable for Türkiye.

The goal of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which started with the status quo formed in the 1923 Lausanne and 1947 Paris agreements by sending their representatives abroad and lobbying against Türkiye, is to create international public opinion in Greece’s favor. Being a party to the 1982 UNCLOS, Greece is trying to impose an agreement on Türkiye that Türkiye is not a party to, in reference to the article “States can extend their territorial waters up to 12 miles.” The Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sharing a series of images on the maps it published, claimed that Türkiye’s demands upset the status quo, disregarded International Law and the International Law of the Sea and that Türkiye endangered peace and security in the region with “Blue Homeland Doctrine”, “Türkiye-Libya Agreement”, “Geographical formations with disputed affiliation”, “The non-military status of the islands”, and “Regions licensed by TPAO.” (Dnews, 2022; Euronews, 2022).

However, it is asserted that the Blue Homeland map was prepared based on principles such as “equity,” “supremacy of geography,” “proportionality”, and “not blocking the passage to the high seas.” Beyond Greece’s claims, it has been prepared only to protect Türkiye’s national interests and its sovereignty in land and sea areas, to officially explain Türkiye’s arguments against Greek arguments (Gürdeniz, 2020; Gürdeniz & Yaycı, 2020; Yaycı, 2022).



US-Greece Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement signing ceremony. (US Embassy in Greece, 2021)

According to the Blue Homeland doctrine, a) In regions less than 400 nautical miles, the continental shelf of the mainland is taken as the basis, not the islands. b) The sovereignty status of Islands, Islets, and Rocks whose sovereignty has not been transferred to Greece should be determined. c) No further expansion of the “6 miles” maritime jurisdiction in any region should be allowed. d) It is stated that because of the armament of the islands ceded to Greece, provided that they have a non-military status, the transfer of sovereignty rights has disappeared. e) Although Greece has 6 miles of maritime sovereignty, its claim of 10 miles of airspace is against international law and is unacceptable (Yaycı, 2022, p. 295).

Yaycı claims, “There is no issue on Sea of

Islands. There are only Greece’s demands” (Yaycı, 2022, p. 295). These demands cannot be given concession or accepted following Blue Homeland Doctrine. Regarding understanding Regional Security, mutual agreement is essential for developing security. Accepting the facts demanded by Greece and any concession will create a serious national security problem for Türkiye and a vital security vulnerability in the regional security complex.

### **Activities of Non-Regional Actors and the Cracks in Regional Security**

As mentioned previously, many state and regional and non-regional actors take part and sometimes even take sides in

the relations between Türkiye and Greece in the Sea of Islands and the Eastern Mediterranean. This state of involvement and taking sides not only increases the tension in the region from time to time but also damages the establishment of the ground for reconciliation. This situation leads to the increase of problems rather than contributing to solving the problems encountered in developing regional peace.

### **The contradictory USA policies in the Eastern Mediterranean increase the risk of regional conflict.**

The USA, which wants to continue its military and intelligence operations in the region and to sell its natural gas to Europe via the LNG method, intervened in the tension between the two countries with a provocative approach rather than soothing. The Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement (MDCA) was signed between Greece and the USA. US Central Command (CENTCOM) has between 60,000 and 70,000 soldiers in 21 countries in the region. These are a clear demonstration of its interest in the region. On the other hand, the USA claims it has implemented a policy of restraining regional powers that could maintain their influence, seek dominance, or threaten the status quo (Yegin, 2022). At the same time, it tolerates and even supports Greece's arming of the non-military islands. The USA established a military base in Dedeağaç (Alexandroupoli), 45 km from the Greek border with Türkiye.

The US claims that it removed Türkiye from the F-35 program due to the purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense platform. However, the possibility of selling the F-35 to Greece is being discussed in the US Senate. While this shows that the USA is not a party to the deterioration of the security status quo "for the moment," it is obvious that the USA carries big sticks to Türkiye (CNN Türk, 2022; Noi, 2022; Reuters, 2022). In addition, the USA, which deployed to the Greek Islands by arguing the threat of Russia, increases the possibility of militarization and active conflict in the region, leading to an escalation of tension under the umbrella of deterrence of the threat factor.

While the contradictory USA policies in the Eastern Mediterranean increase the risk of regional conflict, it is observed that the EU's position in the region supports the Greek thesis, based on the EU's Türkiye report published in 2021. EU officials stated that the Seville map was not prepared by them. They claim that the problem between the two countries regarding the determination of the maritime jurisdiction area and the use of resources can be resolved through goodwill, dialogue, and negotiation by establishing good neighborly relations according to international law. Despite this, in the "Türkiye 2021 Report" published by the EU, they defined the tension experienced in the disputed areas in the second half of 2020 as Türkiye's "provocative" actions (European Commission, 2021, p. 2). They stated that the drilling activities conducted by Türkiye in the disputed areas were seen as "unauthorized drilling activities" (European Commission, 2021, p. 6).

They declared that the continental shelf agreement signed between Türkiye and Libya “must be annulled, claiming that the rights of the third states have been usurped” (European Commission, 2021, p. 7). Rather than acting as an impartial mediator, the EU has taken a bilateral stance by dictating Greece’s arguments to Türkiye. The background of this attitude of the EU lies in the desire to make the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Islands an EU sea. Encouraged by this desire, Greece continues to arm the islands with non-military status in the Sea of Islands (Durul, 2022).

In today’s conjuncture, with the Syrian Civil War, the Russia-Ukraine War, the oil monopoly of OPEC+ countries, Nigerian instability, and Israel’s desire to transport the gas extracted from the “Leviathan” gas field to the EU, the EU’s interest in the Eastern Mediterranean has increased. To end the EU’s dependence on Russian Gas, it is obvious that they do not want a state they do not want within their union to take over control in the Eastern Mediterranean. This demonstrates the importance of friend-enemy identification in the regional security complex.

On the other hand, Russia uses its energy reserves, its most significant strategic trump card, as a shield against the heavy sanctions imposed on it with the Ukraine war. The energy crisis that arose when Russia cut off gas flow to Europe via “North Stream 1”, one of the main pipelines from which it supplies gas to Europe, clearly reflects this. Although it was stated by EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen that “Russian President Vladimir Putin uses energy as a weapon,”

Russia will continue to use the energy trump card against the pressure and sanctions imposed on it (BBC News, 2022). For this reason, the EU, searching for an alternative to Russian gas, wants to establish different energy routes and expand the supply chain. At this point, the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean comes to the fore even more. Although the EU tried to draw a route that could be created through Greece and Southern Cyprus by excluding Türkiye from the region, Russia displayed an attitude by putting Türkiye at the forefront in the region. The softening in Türkiye’s Syria policy, the attempt to establish stability by declaring a ceasefire while supporting the opposing sides in Libya, the hosting of the Ukraine-Russian War peace meetings in Istanbul, and the developments in Türkiye’s balance policy have enabled constructive steps to be taken in relations between Russia and Türkiye.

In addition, the silence of the EU and the USA on the armament of the islands, and the EU military operation IRINI exercise under the umbrella of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) to control the arms embargo against Libya, has alienated Türkiye from the countries it is currently allied (EUNAVFOR MED, 2022). At the same time, this situation was also affected by the fact that FETO terrorist organization members took refuge in countries such as the USA and Greece after the coup attempt on 15 July 2016.

It is obvious that Russia will always want to hold the strategic natural gas trump card in a multipolar world. Therefore, Russia will be willing to support Türkiye as an energy transfer center in this position (Teslova,

2022). Putin's recent statements that "President Erdogan is a strong leader and Türkiye is a reliable partner" shows Russia's support for Türkiye. In addition, Putin stated that "They offered Türkiye to establish a gas center in Türkiye for European consumers" and added that "Türkiye accepted this offer in line with its interests" (SABAH, 2022b).

### Conclusion

According to the understanding of the Regional Security Complex, it is reasonable for Türkiye to perceive Greece's theses and the international public opinion that has formed as a threat and to follow a political and diplomatic path towards these threats. At the same time, factors such as the historical turmoil, uncertainty, and hydrocarbon reserves of geostrategic importance discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean between Türkiye and Greece have led the two countries to adopt a different security approach to protect their interests. However, when we look at it with the understanding of Buzan and the Copenhagen School, the Seville map and the Greek theses based on it show that they follow a policy of escalation rather than appeasement in the region. While the contradictory US policies in the Eastern Mediterranean increase the risk of regional conflict, the EU's position supports the Greek thesis based on the Türkiye report published in 2021.

It can enable the EU to look at the problems within itself from a distinct perspective and the problem of the islands between Greece and Türkiye from a distinct perspective (Channel Islands Brussels Office, n.d.). Although the map of Seville is not accepted as a document with legal validity by the European Commission,

it supports the Greek actions that caused the tension in the region to increase with the theses it developed on the map of Seville. This support, especially led by France, was also operationally reflected in the military field. The command and administration of the IRINI operation, which was launched in 2016 to ensure the security of the arms embargo imposed on Libya because of the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) and to ensure a permanent ceasefire, alternates between Italy and Greece at 6-month intervals. However, because of the EEZ agreement Türkiye signed with Libya's National Government, instead of inspecting the ships in the region, the Naval Mission only inspected Turkish ships, as Deputy Foreign Minister David Schenker said. On the other hand, it aims to change the region's status quo ignoring the support of countries such as Egypt and the UAE to the pro-Haftar rebels (Euronews, n.d.). This is the most important example of the EU's ignoring the principle of neutrality approach to the problems in the International Law of the Sea and demanding stability for the interests of the union instead of the principle of mutual agreement.

The Eastmed Pipeline trial of the countries in the region and its disruption with the Libya Agreement show that Greece and its supporters have a *fait accompli* in regional security. As a result of the Türkiye-Libya maritime authorization agreement, it was understood that the Eastmed project could not be implemented in practice. Countries such as Israel and Egypt started negotiations instead of excluding Türkiye from the Eastern Mediterranean regional complex. The resumption of mutual ambassador appointments with Israel in 2022 is a key step for normalizing relations between the two countries.

Greece's desire to extend its territorial waters from 6 to 12 miles continues. The Greek Ta Nea Newspaper claimed in October 2022 that the government could issue the decree directly and notify the UN without the obligation to agree with Türkiye. Greece stated that preparations were made for this (Mega, 2022). According to the 1995 Turkish Grand National Assembly declaration, this situation is a cause of war. It is a claim that will directly affect regional security and stability. The solution to the problem is that before the mutual dialogue, countries and international actors who support the demands and actions of Greece that will usurp Türkiye's rights in violation of international law respect Türkiye based on the principle of fairness of international law. The only basis of the problem is that these countries, which have alliance ties within NATO, openly take sides in the problem between the two NATO members and that the so-called allies in regional security act following the interests of the other by excluding one. With the Blue Homeland Doctrine, Türkiye should pursue an egalitarian policy in regional security and follow international law, not give up on its national interests and sovereignty rights, and recognize its friends and enemies. Türkiye's alliances should be questioned if necessary.

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