

Greece's Focus Against Russia Emboldened Turkey to Escalate Issues in the Aegean

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Greek Defence Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos said in April, and received much anger from the Greek public, that due to the war in Ukraine, “now is not the best time to speak against Turkey in NATO.” Less than two months later, on June 3, the defence minister said that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan “always provokes tension whenever he feels threatened or faces problems at home.” This was said following the escalating Turkish claim that many of the Greek islands are indeed Turkish and need to be demilitarised.

“It is our capabilities that deter the other side from daring a military engagement, because they know the heavy cost that they would be forced to pay. Our armed forces are at all times vigilant, fully ready and decisive,” Panagiotopoulos added.

As Panagiotopoulos downplayed the permanent threat of Turkey (whether it be ruled by Erdoğan or a Kemalist), he effectively invited an escalation by announcing that Greece is more focussed on carrying out anti-Russia actions in Ukraine than prioritising the security of Greek territory and citizens.

By June 9, the defence minister changed his tune:

“We will not provide [to Ukraine] anti-aircraft missiles from our islands or anti-ship missiles, no matter how much they ask us to do so, because we face a real threat,” Panagiotopoulos said in reference to the threat Greece faces from Turkey in the Aegean that has now become a crisis but two months earlier he did not want to deal with.

On the same day, Erdoğan said he is “not joking” about his calls for Greece to demilitarise islands in the Aegean Sea, adding:

“I warn Greece to avoid dreams, acts and statements that will result in regret. Come to your senses.”

For his part, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said on June 7 that Greece has an “inferiority complex”, has become “much more aggressive” and that “the sovereignty of the islands will be questioned if (Greece) does not end its violation.” At the same time, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar demanded that Greek officials get permission from Ankara before visiting the Aegean islands.

This barrage of assaults against Greece’s sovereignty over the Aegean Islands was of course preceded and followed by pro-Erdoğan media increasing propaganda that the Greek islands must be demilitarised as per the terms of the Treaty of Lausanne and/or that they are indeed Turkish islands instead.

[CNN Türk](#) hosted professor Hakan Bayrakçı, who outlined how Turkey can invade the Greek islands; former Turkish State Minister Masum Türker also appeared on [CNN Türk](#) to propose the idea of the Turkish Armed Forces carrying out “clearing operations” on Greek islands; and, Haber Turk hosted former army chief and professor Naim Babüroğlu to claim that Greece illegally occupies Turkish islands, among a plethora of other recent examples available in Turkish media.

Responding to this barrage of propaganda and revisionism on the status of the Aegean Islands, Athens on June 14 published [16 maps](#) that seek to demonstrate and explain the illegal and revisionist nature of the Turkish assertions and actions concerning the Greek islands from 1973 until the present.

“In an effort to increase the wider public’s awareness of Turkish revisionism, the attached maps depict in a vivid and irrefutable way the Turkish illegal unilateral actions and claims,” a Greek foreign ministry announcement said.

The US State Department clarified in statements made on February 11 and June 2 that Greece’s sovereignty of these islands is beyond question, while the European Commission spokesman for external affairs Peter Stano said on June 10 that Turkey must respect the sovereignty of all EU member states “in their territorial waters and airspace.”

Panagiotopoulos revealed in February 2021 that Greece and Turkey had almost gone to war three times in the summer of 2020 due to the crisis with the Turkish Oruç Reis research vessel violating Greece’s territorial waters. Turkey’s aggression was quiet in the summer of 2021 as the country was in the midst of dealing with a COVID-19 pandemic and the consequential economic fallout.

This evidently gave Greece a false sense of security as the country downplayed any Turkish threat as it instead prioritised carrying out Washington’s demands against Russia. It is now appearing that summer 2022 will be another “hot” one, so-to-speak, as relations between Athens and Ankara continue to deteriorate.

Although the possibility of a Greek-Turkish war remains low despite Ankara’s massive escalation in rhetoric and revisionism, Erdoğan has proven to be an unpredictable leader, another reason why he continues to cause angst and frustration in NATO. Regardless, the words of Panagiotopoulos in April that “now is not the best time to speak against Turkey in NATO” will be one that hurts the ruling New Democracy party in Greece further as its popularity continues to decline according to polls following rising living costs and the violation of neutrality in the Ukraine war.

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