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GREECE – TURKEY: BALANCE OF POWER AT SEA

Aegean Sea, East Mediterranean, and Beyond

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About the author

Themistoklis Zanidis is a retired officer of the Hellenic Navy and a consultant in international relations and strategic affairs. He holds postgraduate degrees in International Relations and European Affairs from the University of Piraeus, and in Political Science – United Nations and Global Policy Studies from Rutgers University. He also holds a BA in Cultural Studies (Greek Civilization) from the Hellenic Open University.

His career spans military service, academic research, and policy consulting, with a focus on strategic culture, geopolitical competition, and transnational diplomacy. He has contributed analyses and articles on defense, international governance, and regional security, and is a member of political science associations in Greece and the United States. He has also worked with the United Nations Development Coordination Office on global policy initiatives.

Drawing on both operational and academic experience, his work addresses critical issues in Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, and broader global governance through a multidisciplinary lens.

Abstract

Historically, the Aegean Sea has been the cradle of Greek civilization and consequently the center of gravity of the modern Greek state. However, centuries after the arrival of the Turks, the Aegean Sea has transformed into a theater of geopolitical competition between Greece and Turkey. On several occasions, in the recent past, this competition has escalated into open war or disputes regarding territorial waters, airspace, and the continental shelf. These disputes have led Greece and Turkey to the edge of armed conflict, most notably in 1976, 1987, and 1996.

Today, in an era of rapid global transformation, shifting power, and uncertainty, Turkey is pursuing the expansion of its regional influence through major investments in its domestic defense industry. Simultaneously, Athens, finally emerging from the financial crisis, is acting towards modernizing its military capabilities to restore the balance of power with its main rival, Turkey.

This short paper focuses primarily on the naval modernization capabilities of both nations and their modernization efforts. Additionally, this study aims to provide a clear understanding of the current balance of power in the Aegean and its implications for regional stability in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Introduction

The Aegean Sea is considered one of the most contested zones in the entire world due to its strategic value. The Aegean connects the Black Sea, through the Bosporus Straits, to the Eastern Mediterranean with significant shipping lines. Additionally, it hosts numerous islands, which complicate maritime governance. Thus, both countries are contesting over sovereignty and maritime boundaries, investing heavily in their naval capabilities.

The origins of the strategic competition between Greece and Turkey can be traced to the late Ottoman period. Following the downfall of the Ottoman rule, the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 reshaped the political borders of the region. According to the treaty, most of the Aegean Islands were assigned to Greece, establishing a new status quo.

Since then, disagreements have deepened around the interpretation of the Treaty of Lausanne. The different approaches led to tensions regarding the demilitarized status of specific islands in the northern Aegean. However, Turkey's deployment of the Army of the Aegean in Asia Minor, along with its declared *casus belli* against Greece's rightful extension of territorial waters, according to UNCLOS, has forced Athens to preserve an extended military presence on the islands. These dynamics have maintained a gray zone, frequently activated during periods of heightened tensions. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) grants any coastal state the right to expand its territorial waters to 12 nm. In this regard, Greece reserves the right to exercise this right according to International Law, but Turkey, not a party to UNCLOS, rejects the right of Greece, arguing falsely that such a move would effectively enclose its coastline and restrict access to international waters.

From the Turkish perspective, since 1995, any extension of Greek territorial waters in the Aegean is considered a cause of war *(casus belli),* which is directly against the UN Charter[1]. At the same time, Turkey argues that Greece has limited rights on the continental shelf and the exclusive economic zones (EEZs), particularly regarding the legal weight of Greek islands near the Turkish mainland. Furthermore, different approaches regarding airspace have led to numerous violations of Greek airspace and the Athens FIR by Turkish fighter planes, adding significant tension. Even though periods of de-escalation and diplomatic approach have occurred, the Greek-Turkish relations are extremely fragile due to Turkish expansionism.

[1] UN Charter – Prohibition of Threats of Force (Article 2, Paragraph 4): The Charter prohibits *the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.* Turkey's declaration of casus belli (cause for war) if Greece exercises its legal right to extend territorial waters to 12 nautical miles is considered as a direct threat of force, thus violating this core principle.

Military Capabilities and Modernization Efforts

Greek Naval Forces

Due to the significant and realistic threat to the Greek national security and sovereignty, as well as the broader regional instability, Athens has undertaken a significant modernization of its armed forces, emphasizing naval power. Consequently, Greece seeks to maintain a credible deterrent posture in the Aegean, leveraging its complex geography. In this regard, the Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis has revealed the plan of his government to invest €25,8 billion over the next 12 years for military modernization, underscoring the political intentions for the long-term transformation of the Hellenic Armed Forces.

Due to geography, the Hellenic Navy is the first line of defense. Thus, its modernization strategy is based on three main pillars: first, to implement advanced technologies that offer real-time tactical awareness, targeting accuracy, and enhanced survivability. Second, to improve power projection capabilities through state-of-the-art platforms operational either autonomously or in joint force structures, and finally, to deepen cooperation with NATO and EU allies, ensuring that Greece is a crucial part of the alliance's southeastern flank.

Eventually, this significant investment should not be seen as a mere reactive move to Ankara's expansionism, as it reflects Greece's intention to become a strategic partner in the region, capable of defending its sovereignty and national/European interests. The acquisition of next-generation frigates, and stealth submarines, and the development of the multilayer defense system, mainly in the Aegean, is toward shifting the regional balance in favor of Greece, but in terms of quality, not quantity. In this regard, Athens is acquiring high-end platforms and thus capabilities, sealing its national security and the containment of Turkey. The modernization leap is also politically significant as *it signals that*

Greece is not merely securing its territorial integrity but is recalibrating its defense doctrine to match the realities of a multipolar, threat-intensive maritime environment in a destabilized region.

FDI Frigates

At the heart of Greece's naval modernization is the procurement of the **Kimon-class** frigates, French-designed **FDI (Frégate de Défense et d'Intervention)** 4,500-ton class high-sea warships[2] tailored to meet the Hellenic Navy's operational needs. Three vessels have been ordered from Naval Group, with the option for a fourth, marking the most advanced surface combatant acquisition in Greek naval history. HS Kimon, HS Nearchos, and HS Formion[3] are multipurpose frigates signal a strategic leap in both capability and intent, transitioning the fleet from aging legacy systems to a modern, network-centric force capable of operating in high-threat maritime environments.

Technologically, the Kimon-class is built around multi-domain warfare. Each ship is equipped with the Thales Sea Fire four-panel AESA radar system, offering 360-degree coverage and the ability to detect, track, and engage a broad spectrum of aerial threats, including stealthy cruise missiles and swarm drones. The radar is integrated with the Aster 30 surface-to-air missile system, giving Greece a powerful area air-defense capability well beyond its current standards. This allows the Navy to project an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) bubble around key Aegean islands and critical sea lanes, reshaping the deterrence dynamic in the region. Additionally, the ships are armed with the MBDA Exocet MM40 B3C anti-surface missiles, RAM systems for self-protection, the MU90 antisubmarine torpedoes, and the 76mm gun[4]. HS Kimon frigate

[2] https://www.naval-group.com/en/naval-group-launches-hs-kimon-first-fdi-frigate-hellenic-navy
[3] The fourth has not been named yet by the Hellenic Navy.
[4] https://www.naval-group.com/en/naval-group-launches-hs-kimon-first-fdi-frigate-hellenic-navy

embarks simultaneously a helicopter and a capacity for an aerial vehicle (UAV)[5].

Significantly, HS Nearchos. HS Formion and likely the fourth frigate will also be armed with the MdCN (Scalp Naval) strategic cruise missile. With a range exceeding 1,000 kilometers, the inclusion of the Scalp Naval transforms the Kimon-class into a truly long-range strike platform, one of the very few in the region. The capability of this weapon system is unique for the Hellenic Navy, adding strategic depth. For the first time in its history, Greece will be capable of delivering precise strikes against high-value targets on land from a standoff distance, thus it is serving as a credible tool of conventional deterrence in a major crisis.

Regarding surface and subsurface combat, as mentioned above, the Kimon-class frigates are equipped with Exocet MM40 Block 3C anti-ship missiles, MU90 torpedoes, and a suite of sensors that allow for high-resolution undersea warfare, vital in the complex conditions of the Aegean. SETIS, the combat management system, ensures advanced warfare compatibility, allowing the ships to cooperate by sharing tactical awareness across the allied forces.

The aforementioned warships will offer unprecedented capabilities to the Hellenic Navy, which will be able to operate away from its bases. Their technological equipment positions them as key assets for any naval mission in the Eastern Mediterranean, like protecting energy infrastructure and operations near Cyprus. Their deployment is expected to be faster, offering a tactical advantage to the Greek armed forces.

Besides the tactical perspective, the entire program reflects the strategic decision of Greece to align with France as a military partner. The agreement between the two European nations includes industrial cooperation, transfer of

[5] https://www.naval-group.com/en/naval-group-launches-hs-kimon-first-fdi-frigate-hellenic-navy

technology to Greek companies, and training. The political message is loud and clear: *Greece is not only modernizing its fleet, but it is also reshaping its whole defense doctrine to operate as an advanced naval power in the areas of its national interests.*

FREMM Frigates

Additionally, as part of Greece's naval modernization program, the government is in negotiations with Italy to acquire 2+2 FREMM frigates currently serving with the Italian Navy. These modern warships are intended to replace the aging Elli-Class S frigates still operating in the fleet, bringing a major leap in capability. The FREMMs are proven, multi-role platforms with strong anti-air, anti-submarine and surface-to-surface capabilities which are needed for Athens to secure its interests in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean. Finally, the negotiations and the potential deal signal a growing strategic partnership between Athens and Rome.

Submarine Force

The Greek submarine force is vital to the country's strategic objective in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, the Greek government has emphasized modernizing the country's submarine fleet and subsequently its capabilities.

The Hellenic Navy has operational four advanced submarines equipped with Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP) technology, the Type 214 Papanikolis-class. Those vessels offer operational flexibility due to their unique stealth characteristics, which have adapted perfectly in the Aegean's maritime environment, which is characterized by thousands of islands and narrow straits. This advanced class of conventional submarines has provided Greece with a

strategic advantage in underwater operations, while Turkey is currently catching up with the deployment of its Type 214 submarines.

Athens, to maintain its strategic advantage in submarine warfare against Turkey, has revealed its plans to strengthen its submarine fleet. According to P.M K. Mitsotakis and the Minister of Defense, Mr. N. Dendias, the Hellenic Navy is considering the acquisition of four next-generation submarines to replace aging Type 209 vessels. The first move towards modernizing the fleet is getting advanced torpedoes. That's why the Hellenic Navy is focusing on buying top-notch torpedoes to boost the firepower of its submarines. In March 2022, Greece struck a €112 million deal to pick up 44 high-tech German torpedoes, specifically the DM2A4/SeaHake.

Regarding the missile equipment, the Type 214 submarines of the Hellenic fleet are armed with Harpoon anti-ship missiles and have already been integrated into both the 209 and 214 classes, allowing these submarines to strike surface targets at extended ranges. At the same time, *discussions are underway to arm the Papanikolis-class with MdCN (Scalp Naval)* strategic cruise missiles, an upgrade that would introduce a deep-strike, land-attack capability to Greece's submarine force for the first time. If implemented, this move would elevate the Navy's strategic reach well beyond traditional sea denial, allowing for credible precision strike from underwater platforms.

Furthermore, the Hellenic Ministry of National Defense has realized that the older Type 209 class submarines are getting outdated, so they're checking out options for four new submarines. The goal is to replace the outdated platforms with modern and more capable ones that come with upgraded sonar, propulsion, and command systems. This is crucial for keeping a strong naval presence in the Aegean Sea and the broader Eastern Mediterranean, as well as an advantage against Turkey. Plus, bringing in these new submarines will standardize the fleet

around AIP-capable models and make sure Greece's undersea warfare capabilities are in line with NATO standards for the future.

The submarine fleet is a reliable and hard-to-detect means for surveillance and deterrence. Strategically, it balances the outnumbered Greek navy against the Turkish fleet. Finally, the submarine fleet will ensure that Greece will be present in every contested area, ready to challenge the Turkish ships, reinforcing Greece as a cornerstone of regional security.

Achilles Shield: Air and Missile Defense Systems

Although not strictly naval, integrated air and missile defense plays a key role in the overall maritime security posture. Greece is developing an anti-drone, air-defense, and subsurface defense architecture known as the "Achilles' Shield". This central pillar of Greece's emerging defense architecture is a multi-domain protection system designed to harden the country's national defense posture against modern and hybrid threats. Though still under development, Achilles' Shield is more than a single weapons platform; it represents a system-level approach to security, combining early warning, electronic surveillance, and layered missiles and drone defense. Crucially, it integrates maritime and land-based assets into a real-time operational network, with a specific focus on safeguarding the Aegean Sea, which is the epicenter of Greece's security concerns.

One of the most strategic and novel components of Achilles' Shield is the *anti-submarine surveillance network* being developed for deployment across key points in the Aegean. Utilizing seabed-mounted acoustic sensors, the system is intended to create a persistent underwater situational awareness capability, offering the Hellenic Navy real-time tracking of Turkish naval activity, especially submarine movements. Greek defense tech companies are taking the lead on a project, working under the guidance of ELKAK, the Hellenic Defense

Innovation Center. They're aiming to create Athens' first underwater surveillance grid. Once it's up and running, this system will boost Greece's submarine fleet and surface ships, making it easier to respond quickly to any threats or intrusions in its waters.

Beyond the subsurface layer, Achilles' Shield also encompasses a multi-tiered anti-air and missile defense network. This includes the integration of existing Patriot PAC-3 batteries, naval-based point-defense systems, and a forthcoming anti-drone architecture that targets low-signature, fast-moving aerial threats, particularly Turkish UAVs, which have become a regular feature in contested airspace over the Aegean. The system is designed to cover both static infrastructure, such as naval bases and airfields, and mobile units, including forward-deployed frigates and amphibious assets operating near hot zones.

Achilles' Shield is not just about hardware. It also includes a *command-and-control (C2) backbone* to fuse threat data from radar stations, drones, seabed sensors, and naval units into a single, real-time picture. This level of integration is vital, especially in contested environments, where rapid decision-making and quick interception are essential. The system is designed to meet NATO interoperability standards, enabling Greek assets to connect with wider alliance early warning systems while still maintaining independent operational control.

Strategically, Achilles' Shield signals a doctrinal shift. It reflects a recognition that future conflicts in the Aegean are likely to be *multi-domain, fast-paced, and below the threshold of open war.* By investing in indigenous defense innovation and shifting toward persistent situational awareness and rapid countermeasures, Greece is building a deterrence model based on resilience and visibility: the ability not only to strike, but to see first, track continuously, and deny access preemptively.

In practical terms, the full deployment of Achilles' Shield will make it far more difficult for any hostile actor to operate undetected in Greek-controlled

maritime zones. It is also likely to complicate Turkish naval planning by negating one of Ankara's current strategic advantages: stealthy or surprise maneuvers through underwater or drone-based means. In sum, the Achilles' Shield project is less about chasing numerical parity and more about technology-driven disruption, using networked surveillance and rapid-response systems to preempt, neutralize, or at least contain potential threats before they escalate.

Greek Naval Modernization

In conclusion, Greece's naval modernization program is the first serious attempt to strengthen the armed forces after years of strategic neglect. Specifically, the Hellenic Navy was forced to operate with outdated ships, many dating back to the 1980s and 1990s, whose combat capabilities are strict in modern warfare, while the regional threats became more and more complex.

Due to the economic crisis, budgets have been limited, and updates have been postponed or canceled. As a result, the Greek fleet was mainly outdated, while the Turkish modernization was extended. For example, the Hydra-class (MEKO 200HN) frigates are still in service without any major midlife modernization. Similarly, the continued reliance on legacy Type 209 submarines, some in service since the 1970s, illustrates the extent to which the fleet had been left behind as neighboring powers, chiefly Turkey, invested in indigenous platforms, drone warfare, and strategic mobility. Not to mention the Elli-class S frigates, which are still the backbone of the Greek fleet. However, the retirement of the Elli-class frigates is a strategic necessity, not merely a logistical one. Their operational value has diminished, and their maintenance costs continue to rise.

The inevitable replacement of the outdated, costly vessels with less but way more capable of operating in modern warfare signals the shift of the Greek Navy towards quality. Additionally, it reflects the new strategic logic of the Hellenic Armed Forces: build a modern fleet ready for modern warfare and

deep cooperation with the allied forces. The Greek government has decided, correctly, that an armed race with Turkey is pointless for Greece, thus it's pivoting its strategic thinking.

Ultimately, this is more than a procurement drive. It's a doctrinal evolution, as the Secretary of Defence, Mr. Dendias mentioned in the Parliament: a recognition that the maritime domain will define Greece's security posture for decades to come. This modernization is about regaining initiative, eliminating vulnerabilities, and ensuring that the Hellenic Navy is ready and not just reactive in an increasingly volatile region. In that sense, the program is as much about deterrence as it is about direction: a clear signal that Greece is not merely keeping up but reshaping the regional balance on its terms.

Turkish Naval Forces

Over the past two decades, Turkey has undertaken one of the most ambitious naval expansion programs in its modern history. Anchored in the broader goal of achieving defense autonomy and projecting regional power, Ankara's naval doctrine has shifted decisively from coastal defense to open-sea presence and force projection. This strategic transformation aims to secure Turkish interests in the Aegean, Eastern Mediterranean, and beyond, summarized under the Mavi Vatan (Blue Homeland) doctrine.

In this regard, Turkey perceives naval power as central to its ability to deter adversaries, secure energy corridors, and assert political influence across its maritime periphery. The cornerstone of the strategy is the *MILGEM program*, Turkey's flagship Indigenous shipbuilding initiative, which has already delivered corvettes, launched next-generation frigates, and is expanding toward larger vessels like destroyers. Parallel projects, such as the TF-2000 air-defense destroyers, the MILDEN next-gen submarines, and the operational multipurpose amphibious assault ship (classified as a light aircraft carrier), Anadolu, signal

Turkey's intention to transition to a blue-water navy, capable not only of defending its coastline but of projecting power well beyond it.

To summarize, Turkey's naval buildup aligns with the domestic defense industry reforms for self-reliance, export potential, and strategic independence from Western suppliers, especially the United States. This strategy supports Turkey's expansionist ambitions as Ankara seeks regional dominance.

Ada-Class Corvettes

The Ada-class is considered a milestone in domestic shipbuilding, and the defense industry delivered from the MILGEM (Milli Gemi – National Ship) initiative program. This class is the first designed and built entirely by Turkish companies, offering advanced anti-submarine and coastal patrol capabilities to the Turkish Navy. The rather small dimensions, the light weight, and the low acoustic signature offer critical advantages to the Navy as it can operate in contested areas, avoiding detection. Additionally, the ships are equipped with the Genesis combat management system, which is fully developed domestically, while each ship carries Harpoon anti-ship missiles, a 76mm naval gun, RAM (Rolling Airframe Missile) for point defense, and advanced hull-mounted sonar and towed array systems for undersea warfare. The aft flight deck and hangar can support an S-70B Seahawk helicopter, extending the ship's ASW reach and allowing for coordinated air-sea search operations. Until today, four ships, *TCG Heybeliada, TCG Büyükada, TCG Burgazada, and TCG Kınalıada*, are in active service, and their deployment has expanded Turkey's capabilities in surveillance missions near Greek and Cypriot vessels.

The Ada-class offers not significant tactical advantage to the Turkish Navy but also elevates the country's shipbuilding and geopolitical value. It is the crucial first step for Turkey to become a naval exporter -Pakistan has already ordered four vessels of this specific class.

Istanbul-Class Frigates

The Istanbul-class frigates are the upgraded next step of Turkey's MILGEM (National Ship) program. Having gained industrial experience from the Ada-class program, Turkey shifted towards a ship capable of operating in the Mediterranean Sea away from the shore. Istanbul-class frigates are officially classified as multi-role ships specially designed for anti-air, anti-surface, and anti-submarine warfare. Larger than the Ada-class, the new frigates of the Turkish Navy offer improved survivability and extended power projection.

The first ship of the class, TCG Istanbul (F-515), was commissioned in 2024, highlighting Turkey's industrial capacity and the country's ambition to become autonomous regarding the defense industry. The ship has a vertical launch system developed domestically (MIDLAS VLS), which can launch the Hisar-class surface-to-air missiles. Additionally, the ships are equipped with the Atmaca anti-ship missiles, which are the first Turkish cruise missiles with superior capabilities for the American-made Harpoon missile system. Regarding the anti-submarine capabilities, the ships are equipped with a new sonar while supporting S-70 Seahawk ASW operations.

Strategically, the Istanbul-class frigates of the Turkish Navy are designed for long-duration deployments as command vessels in task groups either in the Mediterranean or elsewhere.

Additionally, the class is meant to be the facade of Turkish exports, as Ankara has demonstrated its ability to develop and build domestically reliable platforms capable of multi-missions. This should be considered as a key pillar of the Turkish doctrine of *strategic autonomy through industry*.

TF-2000-Class Destroyers

Until today, the TF-2000-class air-defense destroyers are the most ambitious naval program of the Turkish defense and shipbuilding industry. This multi-mission

destroyer is meant to be the future flagship of the Turkish Navy, capable of operating effectively away from shores in high-congested areas. The destroyers are signaling the ambition of Turkey to become a true sea power with a fully capable blue-water navy under the Mavi Vatan dogma.

Formally initiated by the Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB) and led by STM as the main contractor, the TF-2000 program has now moved into the production phase. The keel of the first destroyer was laid earlier this year (2025), as a high-profile event which aimed to underscore the significance of this project to the national pride.

These destroyers will be by far the largest ships built domestically. They are designed for long deployments as air-defense command platforms capable of providing wide-area protection to friendly forces, but also to critical infrastructure and maritime choke points. Those capabilities should be seen as relevant to operation in the Aegean Sea, but mostly in the Eastern Mediterranean and even beyond.

The ships will be equipped with high-tech sensors and advanced weapon systems. More specifically, they will operate the indigenously developed ÇAFRAD multi-function AESA radar, by ASELSAN, which can track multiple targets and coordinate multiple missile engagements. Regarding their air defense, the destroyers will be equipped with a Vertical Launch System (VLS), which will host SAM made-in-turkey. For surface warfare, the ships will be equipped with a variety of weapons like the Atmaca long-range anti-ship missiles, the Rolling Airframe Missile (RAM) for close-in defense, and the 127mm main gun for shore bombardment and surface engagement. Finally, the ships will be equipped with anti-submarine torpedoes and a full-spectrum ASW.

Strategically, the TF-2000 destroyers will allow Turkey to secure maritime zones, escort high-value targets like the TCG Anadolu, which is commissioned as a light carrier, and project power far beyond home bases. Additionally, the ships will

provide a political tool of presence, allowing Ankara to signal resolve and capability in contested theaters like the Eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea, or Black Sea.

The TF-2000 is also deeply intertwined with Turkey's defense-industrial independence strategy. Nearly all major subsystems, radar, combat management, propulsion integration, and electronic warfare, are being developed domestically. This aligns with the broader strategy to free Turkey from American export restrictions.

Operationally, the introduction of TF-2000s in service will dramatically change the balance of power in the sea in Turkey's favor. While Greece focuses on a high-tech but numerically limited fleet, Turkey is opting for scale and layered capability, backed by a shipbuilding industry that can produce, maintain, and export complex warships. The result is a more self-sustaining, autonomous maritime force designed not only to defend but also to shape the strategic environment around Turkey's maritime periphery.

MARLIN Unmanned Surface Vessel (USV): Electronic Warfare at Sea

The MARLIN Unmanned Surface Vessel is a crucial step for Turkey to develop its capabilities in unmanned naval warfare. This platform is developed by ASELSAN and SEFİNE Shipyard and commissioned to the Turkish Navy in 2024. MARLIN was globally the first unmanned vessel equipped with electronic warfare (EW) capabilities. The small dimensions of the platform allow it to operate in asymmetric naval environments like the Aegean Sea, while its advanced sensors allow it to detect, intercept, and disrupt enemy communications.

Operationally, MARLIN brings something new to Turkey's naval capabilities as it enhances tactical awareness in mixed conflict situations. It can approach undetected other ships, jamming their sensors. Strategically, it backs up Turkey's

Blue Homeland idea by helping hold key sea zones without putting military personnel in danger.

MARLIN has already participated in major NATO exercises, including REPMUS 2022 in Portugal, where it demonstrated interoperability with allied forces, signaling Ankara's intent to export this technology and integrate it into NATO-led maritime operations.

Naval UAVs

Turkey has been investing heavily in unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) operational in the maritime environment in an attempt to enhance its capabilities on naval surveillance, targeting, and striking. In this regard, the main platforms are the Bayraktar TB3 and the Bayraktar Kızılelma, both developed by Baykar Technologies.

- Bayraktar TB3 is a naval variant of the widely deployed TB2, adapted for short take-off and landing on naval platforms like the TCG Anadolu (Turkey's LHD/light aircraft carrier). The TB3 offers real-time ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance), target acquisition, and the ability to carry guided munitions, extending Turkish naval strike reach far beyond line-of-sight constraints.
- Kızılelma is Turkey's first jet UCAV that can take off from carriers, made for both fighting other aircraft and hitting ground targets. It's not fully in service yet, but supposed to give Turkish forces fast speed, stealthy features, and being able to work in tough battle zones. When it's ready, it should really increase Turkey's naval air power, especially in dangerous areas where sending pilots might be too risky.

The combination of the UAVs will allow the Turkish Navy to project power beyond the horizon by extended surveillance and precise strikes without risking any potential losses.

MUGEM Aircraft Carrier and National Submarine

Additionally, to the aforementioned projects, the Turkish Ministry of Defense announced earlier this year (2025) two more ambitious endeavors, the beginning of the construction of the MUGEM indigenous aircraft carrier and the MILDEN, the domestic submarine.

The MUGEN project was revealed to the public first time in 2024 by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It features state-of-the-art technologies that guarantee the seaworthiness of the vessel and hosts three runways–two for takeoff and one for landing. It will be the largest vessel built by Turkish hands with approximately 285m in length and 60,000 tons displacement. The Turkish-designed aircraft carrier will not be nuclear-powered, but Turkish engineers are working on an indigenous developed catapult system, which is expected to replace the modular ramp in the future. The carrier will be able to host up to 50 aircraft, both manned and unmanned (all the future domestic projects of the Turkish industry, like TAI's Hurjet light attack aircraft, TAI's ANKA-III unmanned jet fighter.

The MUGEM aircraft carrier will also be armed with the indigenous missile system MIDLAS Vertical Launching System (VLS) and four Gökdeniz Close-in Weapon Systems (CIWS). Moreover, six Aselsan 25mm STOP Remote Weapon Systems will provide close-range defense mainly against asymmetric threats.

The National Submarine (MILDEN) is the new class of the Turkish submarine fleet, which is expected to be operational in the middle of the next decade. The submarine will highlight the capabilities of the Turkish naval industry, and it will be 80 m long with a surface displacement of 2,700 tons. Additionally, it will feature an Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP) system, which is considered globally the

most capable system besides nuclear power. The submarine will also be armed with domestic sensors and weapon systems specially designed for anti-submarine and anti-ship warfare.

Strategic Implications and the Balance of Naval Power

The naval power between Greece and Turkey can't really be understood good without also looking at the bigger geopolitics stuff going on in the East Mediterranean and around it. Both countries are not merely contesting maritime boundaries in the Aegean, they are projecting competing visions of regional order, sovereignty, and influence that intersect across multiple theaters: Cyprus, Syria, Libya, and now the Eastern Mediterranean energy corridor linking Israel, Cyprus, and Greece.

Turkey's Growing Military Influence

During the last ten years, Turkey has significantly strengthened its presence in the entire region as it has deployed its military and paramilitary assets from Libya to Syria. More specifically, in the illegally occupied northern part of Cyprus, Ankara maintains approximately 40,000 troops and several naval bases. The Turkish presence in the island allows Turkey to deploy rapidly its naval assets into the region. Additionally, the Turkish military presence in Syria is significant, especially in the northern and northeastern regions of the country. The Turkish armed forces have deployed in the area since 2016 conducting military operations against the Kurdish population. The buffer zone created between the Kurds and its borders offers Ankara strategic depth and enhances its security. Furthermore, Turkey maintains a military presence in Libya as it intervened in the civil war

siding with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). Ankara and Tripoli's agreement on their maritime zones in 2019 was utterly rejected by Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus.

The extended Turkish military presence in the region poses a threat to Israeli interests leading to the deterioration of the relationship between the two powers. Turkey's support to Hamas is directly hostile to Israeli interests while the strategic competition between them has moved to Syria.

The Israel-Cyprus-Greece Energy Axis

The trilateral partnership between Greece-Cyprus and Israel, the cornerstone of the Greek strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean, is focused mainly on energy cooperation and maritime security. The centerpiece of this partnership is the EuroAsia Interconnector which is a high-voltage direct-current electricity cable linking Israel to mainland Greece through Cyprus and Crete. The significant project aims to connect Israel with the European power grid securing both parts' resilience. Even though EuroAsia is a civilian project, it has deep geopolitical consequences as it provides an undersea infrastructure corridor, potentially vulnerable to sabotage or strategic pressure, that reinforces the legal and operational link between Cyprus' EEZ and EU territorial waters.

Greece, through this framework, is not merely defending its maritime rights, it is embedding itself in a broader regional security complex that includes Israel's advanced surveillance and naval capabilities, and Cyprus' geographic proximity to key chokepoints. This indirectly raises the deterrence threshold for Turkish maritime activities near Cypriot and Israeli interests, especially in zones claimed by Ankara through its Libya-Turkey EEZ deal.

Shifting Balance and Strategic Calculations

Considering all the above, Turkey's active military deployments in the neighboring states, namely Syria, Libya, and Cyprus, establish Ankara as a significant regional power. Turkey positions naval assets in the Aegean but also creates a grid of military bases, drone fields, and maritime access in other countries of the region, which allows Ankara to challenge its rival states, protect its interests, and exert influence over key sea routes. Greece is lacking, now, the regional footprint of Turkey, however, it is creating a multilayer regional deterrence structure through:

- Strategic alliances and cooperation (France, U.S., Israel, Italy)
- High-end naval acquisitions (FDI frigates, FREMM frigates, advanced submarines)
- Emerging technological infrastructure (Achilles' Shield, seabed sensors)
- Legal instruments (UNCLOS, bilateral EEZ agreements with Egypt and Italy)

In this strategic environment, the naval balance of power is not defined by those who deploy more ships and missiles, but by those who can operate effectively across domains, mobilize allies, and control the strategic narrative.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rivalry between Greece and Turkey has evolved beyond the boundaries of the Aegean Sea towards a wider contest shaped by shifting regional and global changes. Turkey is promoting its national agenda through aggressiveness towards its neighbors and domestic arms investments. Responding to this existential threat, Greece is reinforcing its position through strategic alliances, high-end military platforms capable of deterrence, and strategic strikes, ensuring the stability and the respect of international law.

The competition with Turkey is unfolding on full scale in the land, the sea, the air, space, and cyberspace. The risk lies not just in open escalation, which can lead to military confrontation, but in the erosion of deterrence itself. Possible localized incidents in Cyprus or somewhere in the Aegean or even the Eastern Mediterranean could destroy the fragile balance, testing both regional stability and the cohesion of the eastern flank of the Western world. In this uncertain strategic environment, Greece should not only be ready to respond anytime to any threat against its sovereignty but also promote its agenda and interests.

Finally, as Europe reorients its defense posture in response to renewed security threats, the call to *ReArm Europe* presents Greece with both a responsibility and an opportunity. Positioned at the crossroads of three strategic theaters, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Black Sea, Athens can serve as a frontline contributor to Europe's collective deterrence. Its ongoing naval modernization, deepening defense partnerships with France and the United States, and commitment to NATO interoperability all position Athens to play a stabilizing role in Europe's southern flank. Beyond its geographic advantage, Greece's growing defense-industrial base and operational experience in multi-domain environments could support broader EU efforts to build autonomous strategic capabilities, while reinforcing cohesion within the transatlantic alliance.

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