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REPORT ON A POSSIBLE MILITARY CONFLICT BETWEEN GREECE AND TURKEY. ESCALATION AND DE-CONFLICTION SCENARIOS

John Karkazis, 25 August 2026

A limited military incident between Greece and Turkey is quite possible, but a sustained Greek - Turkish war remains substantially less likely.

The key question under consideration in this report and the required distinction is between "could there be another Lemnos – Kemal Reis type of incident?" and "could such an incident escalate into a wider conflict?" In the context of the above consideration we will examine the capabilities of two key actors, NATO and US, to intervene and prevent a major escalation.

NATO has good tools for preventing an accident from becoming a war, but it does not have the authority or political ability to guarantee that it could stop one. On the other hand US has arguably even stronger intervention and prevention capabilities to check a major escalation.

1. THE POSSIBILITY OF AN INCIDENT

The underlying dispute has not disappeared. It involves overlapping disagreements over maritime boundaries, continental shelves/EEZs, territorial waters, airspace, the status of Aegean islands and military activities around them. Even during periods of improved political relations, these disputes remain.

Indeed, the current picture is mixed. In February 2026, Erdogan and Mitsotakis publicly expressed a desire to continue resolving the longstanding maritime disputes, while in March Turkey was again accusing Greece of violating the status of Aegean islands. More recently, Athens condemned Turkey's establishment of two marine parks describing them as an encroachment on disputed maritime areas.

This combination - political dialogue alongside persistent military and legal disagreement - is precisely the environment in which accidents can occur.

In the above context the Aegean Archipelagos is a particularly dangerous arena for such a military conflict because Greek and Turkish aircrafts, ships and other military assets can operate in relatively confined geographical spaces full of physical discontinuities/barriers (islands).

Next we will examine the following scenario as a quite realistic one:

1. Naval vessels maneuvering aggressively →
2. Minor collision/damage injuries or deaths occur →
3. National outrage arises →
4. Military forces placed on higher alert →
5. Further incidents occur.

The initial collision is much more plausible than a deliberate decision by either government to start a war.

2. THE LEMNOS - KEMAL REIS PRECEDENT

Besides its negative features the Lemnos - Kemal Reis precedent has also some encouraging ones.

The 2020 incident is an important example because it demonstrated both the dangers and the existence of mechanisms to contain them.

After the 2020 Eastern Mediterranean crisis, NATO established a Greece - Turkey military de-confliction mechanism, including a 24/7 hotline intended specifically to prevent incidents at sea or in the air from escalating. NATO explicitly described its purpose to reduce the risk of incidents and

accidents and prevent them from “spiralling out of control.”

2.1 The Significance of the De-confliction Mechanism

As an example, if a Greek and Turkish frigate get into a dangerous maneuvering situation, NATO doesn't need to solve the underlying sovereignty dispute in order to help. It can potentially intervene taking the following actions:

- Introduce immediate communication between the militaries.
- Ask clarification of intentions and separation of forces.
- Ask cancellation/postponement of exercises
- Introduce communication between national political leaderships.
- Introduce monitoring and information-sharing and
- Exercise diplomatic pressure for both sides to stand down.

In the context of the 2020 mechanism NATO reported that the two countries had agreed to use secure communications 24/7, and that the mechanism had already helped reduce risks and even contributed to cancellation of some exercises.

2.2 The Limitations of the De-confliction Mechanism

The crucial limitation in NATO intervention capabilities is that it cannot "order" Greece and Turkey to stop the military engagement since NATO is not a supranational government. Both Greece and Turkey are sovereign NATO members.

NATO can coordinate, mediate, pressure and facilitate communication but it cannot simply dictate actions in political/legal disputes being outside NATO's core role.

In fact, NATO deliberately separated the military de-confliction problem from the underlying territorial dispute. In 2020, Stoltenberg explicitly said NATO was working on military de-confliction rather than negotiating the fundamental dispute between the two countries.

3. PRESENTATION OF ESCALATION AND PREVENTION SCENARIOS

3.1 The Shooting Scenario and NATO

a. A Greek ship and Turkish ship collide >
b. The collision causes casualties >
c. One of the two side fires >
d. The other retaliates >
e. Aircrafts from both sides become involved.

At that point NATO faces an extraordinary political problem: both combatants are NATO members. According to article 5 NATO cannot automatically goes to war against Turkey if Turkey attacks Greece or vice versa. Article 5 requires the Allies to determine that an armed attack has occurred and the assistance provided is whatever individual Allies deem necessary. It does not prescribe an automatic military response.

Moreover, an intra-NATO conflict creates a fundamental political problem: NATO would have to maintain the Alliance while two members were fighting each other. This is very different from NATO defending, say, Turkey against Russia.

3.2 The Shooting Scenario and US

US arguably has stronger than NATO intervention and prevention capabilities.

In a genuine Greek-Turkish crisis, one should pay decisive attention to Washington, not simply to NATO headquarters for the following reasons:
- US has very strong relationships with both militaries and considerable diplomatic leverage over both governments.
- Washington could potentially communicate simultaneously with Athens, Ankara, NATO and European capitals and attempt to establish an immediate ceasefire before the military situation develops momentum whereas Germany and other European allies could play similar diplomatic roles.

3.3. A Dangerous Scenario

One of the most dangerous scenarios isn't necessarily a deliberate aggression but miscalculations combined with domestic political pressure.

Sequential presentation of the above scenario:
a. A Turkish frigate and Greek frigate confront each other >
b. One commander believes the other is attempting to force him away >
c. A maneuver is interpreted as a hostile action >
d. A collision occurs during which several sailors are injured >
e. Social media and television immediately produce nationalist outrage >
f. Athens and Ankara put their forces on alert, aircrafts from both sides are scrambled and a second incident happens before diplomats have stabilized the first (the collision).

At this point neither government necessarily wants an escalation leading to war and consequently the activation of NATO hotline/de-confliction mechanism is of great importance. The key question at this point is if NATO can control the situation.

According to our assessment NATO is capable of controlling the first phases of the escalation but it cannot guarantee an overall control. NATO's ability to prevent escalation is probably strongest before the first shot is fired. Once Greek and Turkish forces have suffered casualties and domestic public opinion demands retaliation, NATO's room for maneuver becomes dramatically smaller.

NATO strong capabilities:
- Communication and military de-confliction.
- Creating channels between commanders.
- Bringing political leaders together.
- Providing a framework for restraint and applying collective diplomatic pressure.

NATO weak capabilities:
- Deciding who is legally right about an Aegean maritime dispute.
- Compelling a sovereign member to abandon a territorial claim.
- Automatically stopping a national military from retaliating after casualties and imposing a ceasefire on two NATO members that have decided to fight.

Consequently the first hours of a serious incident would be absolutely critical.

The encouraging factor is that both Greece and Turkey have enormous incentives not to cross the red line into sustained war. They are economically intertwined, both are NATO members, both have broader regional security concerns and neither benefits strategically from destroying the existing relationship.

The worrying factor is that their militaries are capable, heavily armed, geographically close and operating around genuinely disputed territory.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Another Lemnos – Kemal Reis type of incident is quite plausible and highly probable. A short exchange of fire cannot be ruled out. But the probability that such an incident develops into a sustained Greek - Turkish war is considerably lower, largely because the political, economic and NATO-related costs would be enormous and because NATO already possesses a de-confliction mechanism specifically designed to prevent exactly this kind of accident from spiraling.