

# Turkish-Greek tensions escalate amid NATO-Russia war

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After Greek coast guard boats fired warning shots at the Comoros-flagged merchant ship *Anatolian* on September 10 in international waters of the Aegean Sea, tensions between Athens and Ankara continue to escalate.

Greek President Katerina Sakellariopoulou visited the Aegean islands, including Kastellorizo, Rhodes and Carpathos, two kilometers from Turkey last week. “Greece seeks constructive relations with its neighbors according to international law,” she said at an event marking the 79th anniversary of Kastellorizo’s liberation during World War II. “However, if necessary, it will effectively defend its integrity and its sovereign rights,” she added.

Speaking at a symposium in Rhodes, Sakellariopoulou denounced Ankara’s claims, saying: “As Turkish provocations intensify in Rhodes and the Dodecanese Islands, making false and unsupported claims and questioning our country’s sovereign rights, scientific debate becomes even more important on the 40th anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.”

The islands of Rhodes, Carpathos and Kastellorizo are supposed to be demilitarized according to the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty. However, there are armored and infantry units, land and air bases on these islands, in addition to the law enforcement forces stipulated by the treaty.

“Greece’s rhetoric and provocative actions that have escalated tensions in the Sea of Islands and the Eastern Mediterranean have turned into a security threat for our country,” said Turkish Speaker of Parliament Mustafa Şentop.

In June, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu threatened to invade the islands, saying that “the sovereignty of these islands will be discussed” if

Greece does not stop arming them. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also recently declared, “Your occupation of the islands does not bind us. We will do what is necessary when the time comes. As we say, we could come all of a sudden one night.”

The historical conflicts between the Turkish and Greek bourgeoisies, inherited from the 20th century, have intensified in recent months amid NATO’s war with Russia in Ukraine.

Fearing the potential consequences for the Turkish bourgeoisie of NATO’s war aims in Ukraine (regime change in Moscow, the dismemberment of Russia and its subordination to the imperialist powers), Ankara is not participating in the sanctions against Russia. It has tried to mediate an end to the war. On the other hand, Ankara sees as a threat Greece’s role as an important military base for NATO against Russia, having developed strategic military ties with the United States and France.

NATO views Turkey’s growing commercial, energy and military ties with Russia as unacceptable for NATO. Turkey’s purchase of Russia’s S-400 air defense system has led Washington to impose sanctions on Turkey. Moreover, in response to a possible US refusal to sell Turkey F-16 fighters, President Erdoğan recently said: “It is not only America that sells fighter jets in the world. England, France and Russia sell them. So it is possible to get them from everywhere.”

The possibility that Russia may be using Turkey to evade Western sanctions is increasingly alarming US and European powers. “The US and EU are stepping up pressure on Turkey to crack down on Russian sanctions evasion amid concerns that the country’s banking sector is a potential backdoor for illicit finance,” the *Financial Times* wrote on Thursday.

On the other hand, Greece received its first two F-16

military jets from the United States last week as part of a \$1.5 billion program to modernize its fighter fleet. The AP wrote: “The two F-16s presented at the Tanagra airbase northwest of Athens are the first of 83 to be refitted with advanced electronics, radar and weapons capabilities by late 2027.”

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who met with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris earlier last week, said: “We respond to challenges with readiness, and to those who threaten us—and who say that they will descend upon our islands suddenly one night—we say that we are waiting for them in the light of day, where it will be visible who has International Law on their side.”

Emphasizing France’s full support for Greece, Macron said, “I would like to reiterate this despite the repeated provocations and the questioning of Greece’s sovereignty: Our support and determination here is full.”

Tensions have risen further since Mitsotakis’ speech to the US Congress last May. There, Mitsotakis said: “Greece extends the hand of friendship to its neighbors. But we will not tolerate violations of our sovereignty, violations of our sovereign rights and flights over Greek islands, which must stop immediately. I ask you, members of Congress, to take into account the danger of a new instability on NATO’s southeastern flank when making decisions on arms sales in the region.”

He added, “I ask you, members of Congress, not to forget a wound that Hellenism has suffered for 48 years and which is still not healed. I refer to the aggression in Cyprus and the violent division of the island. No one will ever accept two separate states in Cyprus.” Mitsotakis received a standing ovation at the US Congress.

Replying to Mitsotakis’ speech in Washington, Erdoğan said: “For me, there is no such person as Mitsotakis anymore. We go with politicians with personality and honor. Let Mitsotakis think from now on. The US will probably not make a decision based on his mouth.”

However, the US State Department announced the lifting of the arms embargo on Cyprus for the fiscal year 2023 on Friday. US military bases in Greece have grown in line with NATO’s military deployment against Russia, even as Ankara faced US sanctions over its military ties with Moscow.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry denounced the US sanctions decision, stating: “We strongly condemn the expansion of the scope of the decision taken by the US in September 2020 to lift the arms embargo towards the Greek Cypriot Administration. We fully support the reaction of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) authorities regarding the said decision.”

It continued: “This decision, which is in contradiction to the principle of equality of the two sides on the Island, and which will further strengthen the Greek Cypriot side’s intransigence, will negatively affect the efforts to resettle the Cyprus issue; and it will lead to an arms race on the Island, harming peace and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. We call on the US to reconsider this decision and to pursue a balanced policy towards the two sides on the Island.”

The bourgeois press in both Greece and Turkey use nationalist rhetoric to promote the reactionary geopolitical interests of their own governments and to divide the working class. The possibility of this chauvinist demagoguery escalating into a military confrontation between these two NATO member states is very real. NATO’s war on Russia in Ukraine and the surge of military tensions throughout the Balkans and Central Asia is pouring fuel on the fire.

The only way to stop a devastating war is through the revolutionary mobilization of the international working class on the basis of a socialist program unifying working people across national borders. This requires the building of Socialist Equality Parties in Greece, Turkey and throughout the region.



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