

NATO's Eastern Mediterranean Fault Line:

Turkey's "Blue Homeland," European Maritime Security, and the Strategic Challenge to the International Order

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Summary

The Eastern Mediterranean is entering a more consequential phase of strategic competition. What has historically been presented as a collection of Greek-Turkish disputes over maritime boundaries, Cyprus, airspace, and energy resources is increasingly developing into a wider contest over the rules governing maritime space, regional security, European sovereignty, and the cohesion of NATO.

At the center of this transformation is Turkey's *Mavi Vatan* ("Blue Homeland") doctrine. The doctrine should not be understood simply as a naval slogan. It represents a broader strategic conception of Turkey's maritime interests, combining legal arguments, cartographic claims, naval modernization, defense-industrial development, diplomatic pressure, and the creation of political and operational facts.

The significance of Ankara's current trajectory increased further in 2026 following confirmation that Turkey is preparing legislation concerning maritime jurisdiction and the possible designation of waters with "special status." Turkish officials and institutions have linked the initiative to the broader Blue Homeland concept.

The strategic question for Europe is therefore no longer simply whether Greece and Turkey can resolve their bilateral differences. It is whether the European Union and NATO possess adequate mechanisms to prevent unilateral actions from gradually altering the strategic and legal environment surrounding an EU member state.

The central danger is not necessarily an imminent war. It is the normalization of incremental revisionism.

From Bilateral Dispute to European Strategic Problem

The Eastern Mediterranean occupies an unusual position within the European security architecture. It is simultaneously a maritime corridor, an energy environment, a migration route, a NATO operational theater, a zone of critical subsea infrastructure, and a geopolitical interface between Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and Eurasia.

The region's strategic importance has increased as a consequence of several developments:

- the war in Ukraine and Europe's search for diversified energy supplies;
- the development of Eastern Mediterranean gas resources;
- the growing importance of subsea telecommunications and energy infrastructure;
- instability in the Middle East;
- NATO's increasing concern with maritime and infrastructure security;
- and the emergence of a more contested Indo-Mediterranean strategic environment.

These developments have transformed maritime geography into a strategic asset in its own right. Consequently, disputes over maritime jurisdiction can no longer be treated as technical questions of cartography. They concern access, infrastructure,

energy, military mobility, economic rights, and the political authority to determine the rules governing adjacent maritime spaces.

This is why the Eastern Mediterranean should increasingly be viewed as a **European strategic frontier rather than simply a bilateral Greek-Turkish dispute.**

Blue Homeland as a State Strategy

Turkey's Blue Homeland doctrine has evolved from an intellectual and naval concept into an increasingly comprehensive component of national strategy. Its importance lies in the interaction of five instruments:

1. legal positioning;
2. cartographic and administrative claims;
3. naval and air power;
4. defense-industrial autonomy;
5. diplomatic and information influence.

The reported maritime legislation represents an important development because it potentially moves Turkish claims from the sphere of political declaration into domestic institutional practice. Turkish reporting in May 2026 described a draft framework that could authorize the declaration of maritime areas with “special status,” while connecting the initiative explicitly to Blue Homeland. This does not, by itself, create internationally recognized maritime boundaries. That distinction is fundamental. Domestic legislation cannot unilaterally settle an international maritime delimitation dispute between states. International legal effects arise through applicable international law, agreements, adjudication where jurisdiction exists, and state practice—not simply through the enactment of domestic legislation.

Nevertheless, domestic codification can have significant strategic consequences. It can:

- institutionalize a negotiating position;
- constrain future governments;
- create bureaucratic momentum;
- reinforce domestic political expectations;
- provide a basis for administrative action;
- and generate operational ambiguity for neighboring states.

The strategic importance of Blue Homeland therefore lies partly in its ability to transform claims into sustained state behavior.

The Legal Dimension: Law fare Without Overstatement

The legal confrontation requires particular analytical discipline. Turkey and Greece do not share the same interpretation of maritime jurisdiction and delimitation in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara's official position emphasizes unresolved maritime delimitation questions and argues that overlapping or converging maritime areas should be delimited through agreement on the basis of international law. Athens, meanwhile, emphasizes the rights of islands under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the broader principles of international maritime law. The dispute therefore contains two distinct questions that should not be conflated. First, what rights does international law assign to islands and coastal states? Second, how should overlapping maritime entitlements be delimited in circumstances involving opposite or adjacent coasts?

The distinction matters because the strongest European position is not to characterize every Turkish legal argument as illegitimate. Rather, Europe should insist that contested maritime questions must be resolved through international law, negotiation, and legally recognized mechanisms—not unilateral coercion.

This provides Greece and the EU with a considerably stronger diplomatic position. The objective should be the defense of the legal order rather than the political demonization of Turkey.

The Materialization of Turkish Maritime Power

The legal dimension cannot be separated from Turkey's defense-industrial transformation. Turkey is developing an increasingly autonomous military-industrial base capable of supporting sustained naval, air, unmanned, missile, and expeditionary capabilities. The Turkish Navy's increasing ability to deploy domestically produced platforms is particularly relevant. In 2026, Turkey assumed NATO responsibilities involving the Allied Reaction Force's Amphibious Task Force and Landing Force, with the Turkish Navy operating a task group including TCG Anadolu, TCG Derya, TCG İstanbul, and TCG Kınalıada.

This development illustrates a broader paradox. Turkey's growing military autonomy simultaneously strengthens NATO's operational capacity and increases Ankara's ability to pursue an independent regional strategy. In other words, Turkey's strength is an asset to NATO, but its strategic autonomy can also complicate intra-Alliance disputes. This is one of the central dilemmas confronting Western policy. The objective cannot realistically be to weaken Turkey as a military actor. A stronger Turkey can contribute significantly to NATO deterrence in the Black Sea, Mediterranean, Middle East, and beyond. The challenge is ensuring that increased Turkish capabilities remain embedded within a framework of Alliance discipline, international law, and crisis-management mechanisms.

Greece's Strategic Dilemma

Greece faces a structurally difficult strategic environment. Athens has invested heavily in military modernization and has strengthened its defense relationships with France and the United States. These measures are intended to restore deterrence and reduce the risk that a military imbalance could encourage coercive behavior. Yet Greece confronts a fundamental dilemma. A strategy based exclusively on military balancing can become prohibitively expensive and potentially destabilizing. A strategy based primarily on diplomacy risks allowing unfavorable operational or legal realities to accumulate.

The appropriate response therefore requires a three-dimensional strategy:

1. Deterrence. Greece must retain credible military capabilities sufficient to make coercion unattractive.
2. Legal institutionalization. Athens should continue placing maritime disputes within the framework of international law rather than allowing them to become contests of competing unilateral maps.
3. Europeanization. Where Turkish actions affect EU competencies, European infrastructure, or the sovereign rights of an EU member state, Greece should systematically seek European institutional involvement.

The strategic objective should not be to internationalize every bilateral disagreement. It should be to ensure that genuinely European interests receive a European response.

Energy Is Important—but No Longer the Whole Story

Energy remains a major component of Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics, but it should not be treated as the sole driver. The region's gas discoveries around Israel, Egypt, and Cyprus initially created expectations of a new regional energy architecture. The war in Ukraine subsequently increased Europe's interest in diversified energy sources. Yet the strategic value of the Eastern Mediterranean increasingly extends beyond hydrocarbons. The more consequential assets may ultimately include, electricity interconnections, LNG infrastructure, subsea pipelines, telecommunications cables, offshore renewable-energy infrastructure, ports, shipping routes, and digital connectivity.

This creates a new category of strategic vulnerability. A maritime crisis today could disrupt not only energy exploration but also the digital and logistical infrastructure upon which European economies depend. The Eastern Mediterranean should consequently be incorporated into Europe's emerging concept of critical infrastructure resilience.

Cyprus: The Strategic Multiplier

Cyprus remains the most persistent structural fault line. The division of the island, competing maritime claims, energy exploration, and the unresolved political dispute interact in ways that make Cyprus much more than a bilateral Greek-Turkish problem. The danger is that each additional maritime or energy dispute creates another layer of strategic interdependence. A confrontation concerning drilling can become a dispute concerning maritime jurisdiction. A maritime dispute can become a NATO political problem. A NATO political problem can become an EU solidarity question. An EU solidarity question can become a wider test of Western strategic credibility. Cyprus therefore functions as a strategic multiplier.

Any European policy toward the Eastern Mediterranean that treats Cyprus primarily as a diplomatic problem rather than as part of Europe's maritime-security architecture will remain incomplete.

NATO's Structural Dilemma

The Eastern Mediterranean presents NATO with an unusual contradiction. Greece and Turkey are both indispensable members of the Alliance. Turkey provides enormous military, geographic, and logistical value. Greece provides strategic access to the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean and has become an increasingly important contributor to NATO's southern security architecture. Neither country can realistically be treated as expendable.

At the same time, NATO cannot become an institution for arbitrating sovereign disputes between its members. The Alliance's principal task is collective defense. This creates a structural gap. NATO can manage military deconfliction, but it is poorly designed to resolve competing interpretations of maritime sovereignty. The risk is therefore that unresolved bilateral disputes increasingly migrate into NATO's operational environment. That would be strategically dangerous. NATO's command structure is already geographically significant in the region: Allied Land Command is located in İzmir, while Allied Maritime Command is based in Northwood, United Kingdom. NATO's 2026 restructuring is also giving European Allies greater

responsibility across the command structure while retaining a major U.S. role in theater component commands.

This makes the question of Alliance neutrality in contested operational environments increasingly sensitive. NATO should therefore reinforce procedures ensuring that disputed national claims do not become implicitly embedded in Alliance operational products, mapping, planning, or exercises.

The European Response: From Political Statements to Maritime Governance

The European Union should move beyond periodic declarations of concern. Greece could propose the creation of a European Maritime Legality and Security Mechanism (EMLSM). The mechanism should not be designed as an anti-Turkish institution. Its purpose should be broader. To protect the integrity, resilience, and lawful functioning of Europe's maritime environment against unilateral actions that threaten European sovereignty, critical infrastructure, navigation, or the rights of EU member states. Such a mechanism could coordinate, legal analysis of contested maritime claims, monitoring of unilateral maritime legislation and administrative measures, protection of critical subsea infrastructure, maritime-domain awareness, assessment of navigation risks, coordination between EU institutions and member states, strategic communication and preparation of legal responses where necessary.

The mechanism could also provide a permanent European analytical capability combining international lawyers, maritime-security specialists, hydrographers, energy experts, infrastructure specialists, and naval planners. This would be more useful than creating another purely political forum.

The ITLOS Question

The proposal for greater use of international maritime legal institutions is strategically attractive, but it requires legal precision. The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) has jurisdiction under specific legal conditions. It cannot simply be asked by the EU to issue an advisory opinion resolving a bilateral Greek-Turkish maritime dispute where the necessary jurisdictional basis does not exist. This

limitation should not weaken the proposal. It should make it more credible. The European objective should be to identify questions capable of being legitimately referred to appropriate international legal mechanisms rather than attempting to use advisory jurisdiction as a substitute for bilateral consent.

ITLOS's existing advisory practice demonstrates that the Tribunal can address questions of broad international maritime law. Its 2024 advisory opinion on climate change and the marine environment, for example, illustrates the use of advisory jurisdiction for questions extending beyond a single bilateral dispute. The strategic lesson is therefore not that ITLOS can simply “solve” the Aegean dispute. It is that European states should invest more systematically in international maritime jurisprudence and legal diplomacy.

Strategic Communication: Avoiding the Trap of Anti-Turkish Rhetoric

One of the most important weaknesses in the current debate is the tendency to frame the issue as a binary confrontation between Greece and Turkey. This approach benefits neither side. For Greece, an exclusively bilateral narrative makes it easier for Ankara to characterize the dispute as a historical rivalry rather than a question involving European interests. For Europe, an anti-Turkish narrative risks alienating a strategically indispensable NATO member. For Turkey, meanwhile, portraying every European response as an attempt at containment reinforces domestic narratives of strategic encirclement. A more effective European narrative would be; the issue is not Turkey's rise. The issue is whether regional power will operate within agreed legal and institutional constraints. This distinction is strategically essential.

Europe should make clear that it does not oppose Turkish economic development, defense modernization, regional influence, or legitimate maritime interests. It opposes unilateral attempts to establish internationally consequential realities through coercion or legal acts that exceed their international effect. That is a far more defensible position.

The Real Strategic Risk: Normalization

The greatest danger is not necessarily a sudden naval confrontation. It is the gradual normalization of contested practices. A unilateral map is published. A maritime zone is declared. A research vessel enters a disputed area. A NAVTEX announcement establishes a temporary operational reality. A military exercise reinforces a claim. A domestic law institutionalizes the position. International actors become accustomed to the new circumstances. The original exceptional act gradually becomes the new baseline. This is how strategic environments can change without war. The problem is therefore not merely whether a particular Turkish claim is immediately enforceable. The question is whether repeated acts can gradually modify the cost of resistance.

That is why early European institutional engagement matters.

Policy Recommendations for Greece and the EUA coherent strategy should rest on seven pillars.

1. Establish a European Maritime Legality and Security Mechanism Create a permanent EU analytical and legal mechanism focused on maritime claims, infrastructure, navigation, and international maritime law.

2. Protect Critical Undersea Infrastructure Develop an Eastern Mediterranean resilience framework covering telecommunications cables, energy infrastructure, offshore installations, and maritime transport.

3. Strengthen Maritime Domain Awareness Integrate satellite imagery, commercial data, naval surveillance, AIS information, and national maritime monitoring into a European picture of the operating environment.

4. Prevent NATO Operational Ambiguity Ensure that Alliance planning, mapping, exercises, and maritime activities do not inadvertently validate contested unilateral claims.

5. Preserve Military Deterrence Greece should continue modernization while emphasizing interoperability, readiness, distributed capabilities, air and missile defense, and maritime surveillance rather than simply pursuing platform numbers.

6. Build Legal Coalitions Athens should work with Cyprus, France, Italy, and other interested EU members to develop a common European understanding of maritime legality and infrastructure security.

7. Maintain a Diplomatic Off-Ramp The objective should remain the management and eventual resolution of disputes.

A successful strategy must therefore combine deterrence with dialogue. Europe should be prepared to oppose unilateral coercion while simultaneously maintaining channels through which Turkey can return to negotiated processes.

Strategic Outlook

Three scenarios deserve particular attention.

Scenario One: Managed Competition Turkey continues to advance its maritime doctrine but avoids direct confrontation. Greece strengthens deterrence, the EU develops stronger legal mechanisms, and NATO improves deconfliction. This is the most manageable scenario.

Scenario Two: Institutionalized Revisionism Turkey progressively codifies maritime claims and integrates them into administrative and operational practice. Western governments avoid confrontation because of Turkey's strategic importance. This would produce the most serious long-term challenge because unilateral practices could gradually become normalized.

Scenario Three: Crisis and Miscalculation A naval encounter, energy exploration dispute, air incident, or military exercise produces casualties or an irreversible political escalation. This scenario would immediately test NATO's internal cohesion and the EU's willingness to support a member state under pressure.

The strategic objective of European policy should therefore be straightforward: Prevent Scenario Three by stopping the gradual emergence of Scenario Two.

Conclusion: Defending the Maritime Order

The Eastern Mediterranean is becoming a test of whether the Euro-Atlantic system can reconcile strategic competition with legal restraint. Turkey's Blue Homeland doctrine represents a serious expression of national strategic ambition. Its significance lies not simply in the maritime areas claimed, but in the interaction between legal doctrine, domestic legislation, military capability, defense-industrial autonomy, diplomatic influence, and operational presence. The response should neither be complacency nor alarmism. Europe should recognize Turkey's legitimate strategic weight while resisting the normalization of unilateral practices that undermine the rights of neighboring states and the predictability of the maritime order. For Greece, the central lesson is equally clear. Military deterrence remains indispensable, but deterrence alone is insufficient. The more sustainable strategy is to combine: deterrence + international law + European institutionalization + infrastructure resilience + diplomatic engagement.

The European Union should consequently move from reacting to individual incidents toward developing a permanent maritime-security architecture for its southern flank. The strategic objective should not be to contain Turkey. It should be to ensure that, power operates within rules.

The Eastern Mediterranean will remain contested. That is unavoidable. What is not unavoidable is whether that competition evolves within a rules-based framework or through the accumulation of unilateral faits accomplis. The choice is therefore larger than the Aegean. It concerns the credibility of European sovereignty, the resilience of NATO, and the continued relevance of international maritime law in an era in which geography, military power, energy, and critical infrastructure are becoming inseparable.

For Europe, the central strategic principle should be simple. The maritime order cannot be rewritten incrementally through unilateral legislation, maps, coercive deployments, or institutional ambiguity.

It must remain grounded in international law, negotiated delimitation, freedom of navigation, sovereign rights, Alliance cohesion, and credible deterrence. The Eastern Mediterranean is not merely NATO's southeastern flank. It is increasingly a test of whether the Euro-Atlantic order can defend the rules on which its own strategic security depends.

Appendix

1. Greece and Israel in the Emerging Security Architecture (Admiral Tsailas, RIEAS, July 2026) <https://www.rieas.gr/researchareas/editorial/5097-greece-and-israel-in-the-emerging-security-architecture-of-the-eastern-mediterranean>
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5. [Turkey shelves 'Blue Homeland' bill before NATO summit (Nordic Monitor, June 2026) <https://nordicmonitor.com/2026/06/turkey-shelves-blue-homeland-bill-before-nato-summit-but-erdogan-will-keep-it-as-election-card/>