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## **Strategic Greek-Turkish Competition**

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The lesson from ancient Greece is clear in competition, especially of a strategic nature, avoiding catastrophic blunders often matters more than sheer brilliance. Greek government can take this historical perspective as it navigates the modern-day rivalry with Turkey, particularly in areas of diplomacy, military posturing, and regional influence. Both Greece and Turkey have long-standing disputes, especially over territorial waters in the Aegean Sea, energy exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, and military tensions that arise from their respective NATO memberships. The Peloponnesian War, specifically the contrasting approaches of Pericles and Archidamus, illustrates how overextending or misjudging can lead to self-inflicted harm.

Pericles' advice to avoid risky adventurism and focus on prudent, long-term preparation resonates today. If Greece, like Pericles' Athens, can avoid major strategic mistakes—such as overreliance on foreign alliances, risky military operations, or economic overreach—it may outlast and outcompete Turkey over time, particularly in areas where Turkey might make missteps. Turkey, under President

Erdogan, has at times pursued aggressive, assertive strategies—whether through military incursions into Syria, confrontations in the Eastern Mediterranean, or the handling of its economy—that have garnered both domestic and international criticism.

Greek government could take advantage of such moments, just as Archidamus advised the Spartans to hope for their enemy’s mistakes, while not counting on them. For Greece, a Periclean strategy of restraint, careful alliance-building (especially within the EU and NATO), and internal consolidation—rather than risky escalations—could allow Greece to maintain a position of strength. By not overcommitting to provocations or military escalations with Turkey, Greece could effectively navigate this long-term rivalry, waiting for the moments when Turkey stumbles due to internal issues, regional isolation, or overextension. In sum, history shows that avoiding major blunders is often the key to winning strategic rivalries. For Greek government, maintaining a focus on long-term national strength while letting Turkey overreach or err could be the winning formula in their ongoing competition.

From a Greek perspective, the balance of error in the strategic competition with Turkey is a crucial question, particularly as tensions have escalated in recent years over issues such as maritime boundaries, airspace violations, and natural gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece, under Prime Minister Mitsotakis and its foreign policy team led by Minister George Gerapetritis, faces the challenge of maintaining its position in the Aegean and the wider region while navigating Turkey’s increasingly assertive stance.

Turkey, under President Erdogan, has adopted an aggressive and expansionist approach, which in the short term has gained Ankara some leverage but could also lead to missteps. Erdogan’s foreign policy, characterized by military interventions, assertive naval movements, and a focus on reviving Ottoman-era influence, has at times alienated Turkey from key allies, especially within NATO and the EU. The Turkish economy also faces severe strains, with inflation, currency devaluation, and internal political polarization posing significant long-term risks to Turkey’s regional ambitions. These factors may lead to overreach, where Ankara pushes too far, too fast, and suffers the consequences of diplomatic isolation or internal unrest. Turkey’s

aggressive pursuit of hydrocarbon resources, despite opposition from Greece, Cyprus, and EU members, risks provoking a stronger international coalition against Ankara.

**Strained Alliances:** Turkey's alienation of key NATO members like the U.S. and France, as well as its troubled relations with the EU, could weaken its diplomatic standing. Greece, on the other hand, has successfully fostered strong relations with both the EU and NATO allies, positioning itself as a reliable partner.

**Economic Instability:** Turkey's economic fragility may hinder its ability to sustain prolonged military or diplomatic confrontations, giving Greece an advantage if it can maintain stability and avoid similar internal pressures.

**Greek Concerns about Missteps:** However, Greece's concern that Ankara may be accelerating its campaign to reshape the Aegean order to Turkey's liking reflects the fear that Greece could make its own critical errors. The Greece's openness to being labeled a "discounter" suggests that Greece may need to adopt a pragmatic, calculated approach rather than seeking immediate, sweeping victories. This could mean conceding certain diplomatic points to prevent worse outcomes, such as a military confrontation or prolonged regional instability.

Indeed, it's challenging to gauge the precise balance of errors between Greece and Turkey given the contrasting levels of transparency and political culture in the two countries. Greece, like classical Athens, operates as an open society, where the free flow of information and self-criticism are common, sometimes amplifying the perception of mistakes. Turkey, under President Erdogan, maintains a much more controlled political environment, where internal blunders are either minimized in the public eye or concealed entirely. This discrepancy complicates an objective analysis of who has blundered least and who is best prepared for potential conflict. Nevertheless, a review of some significant actions and missteps on both sides can offer insight.

### **Greece's Strategic Position and Potential Blunders Diplomatic Successes and Regional Alliances**

Greece has scored notable diplomatic victories in recent years. It has forged stronger defense ties with key partners like France, the U.S., Israel and Egypt. Athens signed a defense pact with France in 2021, which includes mutual assistance in the event of a

military attack, and has upgraded its military capabilities through the acquisition of advanced French Rafale jets and U.S.-made F-35 fighters. Greece also works closely with Cyprus and Israel in a trilateral alliance, focusing on energy security and countering Turkish influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, Greece's heavy reliance on external powers, particularly the EU and NATO, could backfire if these allies decide to de-escalate tensions in the region rather than provide direct support in a crisis. This dependence on alliances is a potential blunder in waiting, as external actors might prioritize avoiding conflict with Turkey—a NATO member—over protecting Greece's interests.

Greece's financial recovery since its debt crisis has been steady but fragile. Economic constraints limit its ability to sustain a long-term military buildup or conflict. While Greece has made significant investments in defense, these could become unsustainable if tensions persist for an extended period. A protracted military confrontation could destabilize Greece's domestic economy, leading to political turmoil or forcing Athens to make unfavorable concessions. Public Debate and Division Greece's open society can be a double-edged sword. While public debate and transparency strengthen democratic governance, they can also expose internal divisions and make consensus on defense and foreign policy harder to maintain. Public dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the Turkey issue could lead to political instability, especially if a conflict arises. In the long run, internal discord could prove to be Greece's Achilles' heel if it weakens the country's ability to respond to external threats effectively.

### **Turkey's Strategic Position and Potential Blunders Aggressive Foreign Policy and Overextension**

Turkey's foreign policy under Erdogan has been marked by assertiveness and at times outright belligerence. From its involvement in Syria and Libya to confrontations in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey's military posture has been aggressive. While this has boosted Erdogan's domestic support, particularly among nationalist voters, it also risks overextension. Engaging in multiple theaters simultaneously could stretch Turkey's military and economic resources thin.

If Ankara misjudges the international response or encounters stiff resistance in multiple arenas, this overreach could backfire spectacularly.

Turkey's economy is in a precarious state, with inflation surging and the lira losing value rapidly. Economic instability undermines Turkey's capacity to sustain its aggressive foreign policy. If Turkey's economy continues to deteriorate, it could lead to internal discontent, making it harder for Erdogan to focus on external conflicts. The economic blunders already made by Erdogan's government—such as delaying interest rate hikes and mishandling inflation—pose a long-term threat to Turkey's ability to project power. Economic collapse would severely limit Ankara's ability to maintain military operations or respond to crises.

Turkey has managed to alienate several key regional and international players, including the U.S., France, Egypt, and Israel. This diplomatic isolation reduces Turkey's ability to form meaningful alliances, leaving it more vulnerable to coordinated opposition. While Turkey remains an important NATO member, its relationship with the alliance has been strained, particularly due to its purchase of Russian S-400 missile systems, which has drawn U.S. sanctions and reduced Ankara's access to advanced NATO military technology. This isolation could be a serious strategic blunder if Turkey finds itself facing a united front of adversaries in the region.

**Domestic Autocracy and Over-centralization** Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian rule may project the image of strength, but it could prove to be a strategic weakness. By consolidating power and suppressing dissent, Erdogan has removed many independent voices within the military and government that could provide valuable feedback or alternative strategies. This centralization of decision-making increases the risk of major blunders, as dissenting opinions or critical assessments are less likely to reach the leadership. In a conflict scenario, Turkey's rigid, top-down system may lack the flexibility to adapt quickly to changing circumstances, leading to potential miscalculations. **Who Has Blundered Least?** When weighing these factors, it appears that Turkey may be more error-prone in the long term, primarily due to its overaggressive foreign policy, economic instability, and diplomatic isolation. Turkey's posture of ultra-competence, while carefully curated, conceals a range of vulnerabilities that could become critical in the event of martial strife.

Economic overextension, military adventurism, and the lack of strong allies may prove to be Turkey's undoing if conflict with Greece intensifies. Greece, despite its challenges—economic fragility, reliance on external allies, and internal divisions—has so far avoided major strategic blunders. Its cautious approach, focus on alliance-building, and military modernization have positioned it relatively well. However, Greece's dependence on external actors and the potential for internal political discord remain areas of concern. In sum, while both nations have their weaknesses, Turkey's aggressive overreach and internal vulnerabilities may ultimately tip the balance in Greece's favor, especially if Greece can avoid its own critical missteps and maintain strong international support.

Turkey's abrupt shift from its earlier "soft power" diplomacy to an aggressive, hegemonic posture has proven to be a costly strategic blunder, particularly in the diplomatic arena. In the past, Ankara's skillful diplomacy was admired, as it worked hard to reassure its neighbors and cultivate a regional image of economic and military growth without alarming others. This "soft power" approach, grounded in Atatürk's principles, allowed Turkey to integrate itself more smoothly into the international community while building influence through economic ties, cultural diplomacy, and regional partnerships.

The Shift to Aggression Over the last decade, Turkey's leaders, particularly under Erdogan, have cast aside this conciliatory approach in favor of a strategy that more closely resembles the "Hegemonic King" described by Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*. This model relies on overwhelming strength and intimidation to keep rivals and neighbors at bay, but it has had the opposite effect, pushing countries to unite against Turkey's increasing assertiveness. Ankara's rhetoric and actions, including provocative naval exercises in disputed waters, militarization of foreign policy, and outright disregard for international rulings, have alienated not just neighbors but potential allies globally.

Turkey's diplomacy now leans heavily on the projection of hard power—military might, economic coercion, and bullying rather than dialogue. This shift has turned what was once an admired regional power into a pariah state in the eyes of many Mediterranean and European countries.

**Diplomatic Self-Sabotage by jettisoning its charm offensive, Turkey has made a series of significant missteps**

**Alienating Regional Neighbors:** Turkey's aggressive tactics in the Mediterranean, including deploying the navy to enforce maritime claims and dismissing international legal rulings, have fostered animosity among neighboring countries. Turkey's assertiveness has pushed Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt into stronger alliances with powers like France and Israel, who view Ankara as a destabilizing force. Where once Turkey could have sought cooperation or peaceful negotiation, it now finds itself increasingly isolated, even among some Arab nations who distrust Erdogan's policies.

**Undermining Trust:** A crucial element of diplomacy is trust. By adopting this aggressive stance, Turkey has eroded trust not only with its immediate neighbors but also with major powers like the United States and European Union, which had been key partners in the past. It is difficult to reverse this damage, as Turkey's credibility is in question. Even if Erdogan were to attempt a pivot back to soft power diplomacy, it is unlikely that neighboring states would accept such overtures, given the consistency of Turkey's aggressive actions over the past decade.

**Shallow Pool of Allies:** Turkey's aggressive posture has also shrunk its base of international support. While Turkey remains an important NATO member, its relationship with the alliance has been strained. The decision to purchase Russian S-400 missile systems, despite NATO's objections, was emblematic of Turkey's increasingly confrontational foreign policy. This led to U.S. sanctions and a deterioration of its defense relations with Western powers, weakening Turkey's access to military technology. As a result, Turkey's bench of allies and partners has become shallow and unimpressive. Unlike Greece, which has managed to forge deeper relationships with EU and NATO partners, Turkey finds itself more isolated.

**Diplomatic Conflicts Beyond the Region:** Turkey's confrontations have not been limited to the Mediterranean or Europe. Ankara has taken provocative stances toward other global powers, such as stoking tensions with **India**. These unnecessary conflicts divert Turkey's focus from its core strategic goals and compound its diplomatic isolation. In a multipolar world where regional alliances are increasingly important, Turkey's willingness to alienate major players like India could have long-term consequences for its global standing.

**Greece's Growing Diplomatic Network:** In contrast to Turkey's diminishing influence, Greece has steadily deepened its alliances. While Athens has its own strategic and operational missteps, it has successfully leveraged its position within the EU and NATO to build stronger partnerships. Greece's diplomatic efforts, especially in cultivating defense and energy alliances with countries like France, Egypt, Israel, and the United States, provide it with a robust network of support that Turkey currently lacks. These partnerships are not just formal alliances but are rooted in shared strategic interests, particularly regarding energy security and maintaining stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. The recent defense pact with France, for example, includes mutual defense clauses that could directly involve France in any military conflict between Greece and Turkey. Furthermore, Greece's membership in the EU ensures it has a powerful diplomatic platform to push its case, while Turkey's strained relationship with the EU leaves it without such leverage.

**Ankara's Self-Defeating Behavior:** Ultimately, Turkey's diplomatic malpractice is a significant strategic blunder, and it is doubtful that it can easily reverse course. The consistent pattern of aggressive actions, from flouting international court rulings to provoking maritime conflicts, means that Ankara's soft power has been severely eroded. Even if Erdogan and his government wanted to revert to a more conciliatory posture, it is unlikely that neighboring states or global powers would trust Turkey's intentions. The memory of Turkey's belligerence runs deep, and assurances of goodwill would ring hollow after years of antagonism. In stark contrast, Greece's diplomatic network is expanding, bolstered by shared strategic interests and stronger alliances with key regional players and global powers. Turkey's behavior has driven its neighbors and rivals closer together, creating a united front against its ambitions. As a result, Ankara has created the very thing it sought to avoid: a coalition of states aligned against it.

## **Conclusions**

While Turkey may have committed fewer mistakes than Greece in certain strategic or operational aspects, its diplomatic self-sabotage is a critical weakness. The shift from soft power to an aggressive, hegemonic posture has isolated Turkey diplomatically, alienated its neighbors, and diminished its credibility on the world stage. Greece, on



the other hand, has managed to build and maintain a deep bench of allies, giving it a significant advantage in any prolonged strategic competition. In the end, Turkey's diplomatic malpractice may well outweigh any other advantage it has, making it far more vulnerable to the consequences of its own actions.

Indeed, while Greece may currently hold an advantage in the strategic competition with Turkey, this should be seen as a call to vigilance and proactive improvement, rather than a reason for complacency. As Clausewitz and Archidamus wisely observed, counting on an adversary's blunders is a risky strategy. The fog of war or strategic rivalry means that mistakes are inevitable, but relying on the other side to make fatal errors can lead to disaster if they don't. Greece must ensure that its diplomatic, military, and economic posture remains robust and adaptable to unforeseen challenges.

Greece should continue strengthening its partnerships, particularly within NATO, the EU, and regional alliances. This includes solidifying mutual defense agreements, such as the one with France, and deepening energy and security cooperation with Israel, Egypt, and others.

Greece must maintain a constant and resolute military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean, particularly in asserting its maritime rights. Freedom of navigation operations should be routine and backed by diplomacy to prevent erosion of international norms. Procurement and Modernization: Addressing Greece's procurement inefficiencies is key. Modernizing its naval and air forces, ensuring timely delivery of platforms like the F-35 jets, and maintaining operational readiness will help Greece preserve its edge in a potential conflict.

Greece, while recovering from its financial crisis, is still in a precarious economic situation and cannot afford a long-term military buildup or conflict without risking domestic repercussions. The Balance of Error currently seems to favor Greece, if it can maintain its cautious, strategic approach. Turkey's more aggressive, risk-taking posture opens the door for potential blunders, especially if Erdogan's government faces increased economic or political pressure at home. Greece, by contrast, appears to be playing a more calculated game, focusing on alliance-building, diplomacy, and avoiding unnecessary confrontations. If Turkey overextends or becomes diplomatically isolated, Greece could find itself in a position of relative

strength. However, this balance is precarious. If Greece miscalculates—by either underestimating Turkish resolve or overreaching in its own efforts to counter Turkey—it could find itself on the losing end of the competition.

Greece must also sustain its economic recovery, as a strong economy underpins military and diplomatic power. Defense budgets should align with strategic needs while avoiding overextension that could lead to financial strain. By upping its game, Greece can solidify its advantages while reducing the risk of critical blunders. It must compete confidently but wisely, taking the lessons of history to heart and not resting on the assumption that Turkey's missteps will lead to victory.

Greece's pragmatic view suggests an awareness of this fine balance, indicating that Greece seeks to avoid dramatic missteps while Turkey's more aggressive actions may, over time, lead to greater strategic errors. *In sum, Greece's ability to avoid major blunders and exploit Turkey's potential overreach could tip the balance in its favor, but this requires careful management of both diplomacy and national defense, as well as a clear understanding of Turkey's limitations and potential errors.*