

# NATO's Migrant Mission in the Aegean Raises Major Questions for Greek Foreign Policy

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On 11 February the ministers of defense of NATO agreed to a joint proposal by Germany, Greece and Turkey to involve NATO in the efforts to stem the wave of migrants moving into the Aegean islands from Turkey. While there are still many unclear points about the exact activities of the NATO mission, the political framework of the agreement can be considered *prima facie* as very problematic for Greek positions and interests.



The NATO mission's mandate stipulates that alliance forces will conduct reconnaissance, monitoring and surveillance in cooperation with Greek, Turkish and EU authorities. The main objective is to deter human trafficking networks. NATO forces will not be involved directly in operations. They will only act when they rescue migrants in risk of drowning but, contrary to the practice followed by Greek authorities and EU's Frontex, they will return them to Turkey instead of Greece.

Since the crisis erupted the Greek government has been equivocal about foreign assistance. This was partly due to concerns for Greek sovereignty in an area where Greece and Turkey are in disagreement about the limits of national sea and air space, the jurisdiction of search and rescue operations, the sovereignty of islets etc. Initially Greece declined assistance from the EU, only to relent and accept help from Frontex after the first threats of expulsion from Schengen were aired last fall. Since then it has been accepting international involvement in a piecemeal fashion, in tune with the escalation of pressures and threats from the EU.

NATO's involvement however is a new parameter, given Turkey's role in it. When the idea of a NATO mission was floated (reportedly by Turkish Prime Minister Davutoglu in his last meeting with Angela Merkel) Athens' initial position was that any mission must operate in Turkish waters only. Greece's retreat from this position, to the point of accepting to co-sponsor the demand for a mission to NATO along with Germany and Turkey, is a testament to the extreme pressures it faces from the EU to reduce migrant flows lest it gets kicked out of Schengen.

The Greek government has insisted that during the NATO mission Greek and Turkish forces will only operate in their respective territorial waters. This satisfies its concern not to have Turkish forces operate in Greek waters. As migrant boats cross into Greece, mostly through waters where Greek and Turkish borders are established as the middle distance between the two countries' shores, NATO forces in each country's waters will inform about boat movements the respective national authorities, who will then act to contain them in the area of their sovereignty.

It is unclear however what will be the mission's conduct should it detect movements in international waters, beyond six nautical miles from Greek or Turkish shores. This is perhaps not very probable, given the patterns of boat movements, but it is still an eventuality for which the mission's mandate remains unspecified. For Greece this is a crucial contingency, since its main point of friction with Turkey is precisely operational control over international waters. The Greek position is that Greece has rights to conduct search and rescue operations in an area that corresponds with the Athens Flight Information Region (FIR) – essentially the whole Aegean Sea between the Greek mainland and Turkey. Turkey disputes this.

The main point is that in cases where migrants' lives are not in danger and smugglers and their boats have to be intercepted in international waters, national forces will have to act. Given the main strategic objective of the mission – to return migrants back to Turkey – Turkey will be seen as the obvious actor to conduct these operations. This

contingency may seem unlikely. But the fact is that at a time when Greece and Turkey feud almost daily over operational control in the Aegean, Turkey acquired an internationally sanctioned framework to justify forays into areas that Greece considers as under its control.

Another unclear issue is what NATO involvement means for Greek conduct towards migrants. The NATO mission will transmit information to Greek forces to help them 'deter' migration flows. The Greek coastguard, in cooperation with Frontex, has up to now been taking migrants to Greek shores where they can file asylum claims. Will the Greek coastguard start redirecting migrants back to Turkey under the guise of 'deterring' smuggler networks? Will it do so only when receiving information to this effect from NATO, but continue to bring migrants to Greece when it collects them on its own? Will some Greek forces (coastguard) keep bringing migrants to Greece when they rescue them, while others (the navy as part of the NATO mission) will start moving them back to Turkey? Unless a clear operational plan is laid down, the new mission will only increase uncertainty and confusion for Greece.

This confusion is problematic for Greece, morally and politically. NATO's involvement does very little to solve Greece's dilemmas in the crisis. Turkey faces fewer such dilemmas, given that its main task is to stop people leaving from its soil that is considered by many as safe territory for refugees. Whereas NATO's operations in Turkey will have a relatively straightforward objective, the new migrant mission intensifies existing crosscutting pressures on Greece – from the international community to care for migrants and from the EU to control their movements.

In conclusion, the NATO migrant mission opens up an array of problems for Greece, both in the short-term with regards to the migration crisis, and in the long-term with regards to Greek interests in the Aegean. Greece continues to be unable to convince its allies that responsibility for the continuous flow of migrants lies solely with Turkey. The mission maintains on Greece the burden of containing the movement of migrants, something that Turkey should have been forced to do on its own as the operationally most practical and morally less controversial option. Finally, the political outline of the mission does not safeguard Greece's interests in the Aegean vis-à-vis Turkey.