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Research Article

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NATO and the Turkish-Greek Relationship: A Quest for Cautious Coexistence¹

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Abstract: Since joining NATO, Türkiye and Greece have been both indispensable allies and persistent sources of intra-alliance tension. This article examines how NATO has managed the enduring rivalry between two indispensable allies in practice. While the literature has largely focused on the causes of rivalry and recurring crises in Turkish-Greek relations, less attention has been paid to how the alliance has accommodated this conflict in its functioning. The article introduces the concept of cautious coexistence to describe a distinct mode of institutional conflict management in which rival allies sustain operational cooperation while political disputes remain unresolved. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of NATO military exercises during the Cold War, post-Cold War operations, and confidence-building measures, the article shows that cooperation between Türkiye and Greece has persisted in limited but functional domains, often shaped by procedural neutrality and pragmatic institutional routines. The findings suggest that NATO's effectiveness in this case has rested less on resolving disputes than on containing them, preserving interaction, and preventing escalation. The Turkish-Greek relationship thus illustrates a broader pattern in alliance politics: institutions may sustain stability not by eliminating rivalry, but by absorbing and containing its disruptive effects.

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Araştırma Makalesi

Açık Erişim

NATO ve Türk-Yunan İlişkileri: Temkinli Bir Birlikte Varoluş Arayışı

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Öz: Türkiye ve Yunanistan, NATO'ya katıldıklarından bu yana hem vazgeçilmez müttefikler hem de ittifak içi gerilimlerin süreklilik arz eden kaynakları olmuştur. Bu makale, iki vazgeçilmez müttefik arasındaki kökleşmiş rekabetin NATO tarafından pratik düzlemde nasıl yönetildiğini analiz etmektedir. Büyük ölçüde Türk-Yunan ilişkilerindeki literatür, rekabetin yapısal nedenlerine ve tekrarlayan kriz dinamiklerine odaklanırken, bu rekabetin ittifakın işleyişi içinde nasıl yönetildiğini görece sınırlı biçimde ele almıştır. Bu makale, siyasi uyuşmazlıkların çözümsüz kaldığı durumlarda rakip müttefiklerin operasyonel iş birliğini sürdürmesini ifade eden özgün bir kurumsal çatışma yönetimi biçimi olarak 'temkinli birlikte varoluş' kavramını tanıtmaktadır. Soğuk Savaş dönemi NATO askeri tatbikatları, Soğuk Savaş sonrası operasyonlar ve güven artırıcı önlemler üzerine yapılan nitel analiz, Türkiye ile Yunanistan arasındaki iş birliğinin sınırlı ancak işlevsel alanlarda sürdüğünü ve bu iş birliğinin çoğunlukla prosedürel tarafsızlık ile pragmatik kurumsal rutinler tarafından şekillendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Makalenin bulguları, NATO'nun bu olaydaki etkinliğinin ihtilafları çözmekten ziyade onları sınırlandırmaya, taraflar arasındaki etkileşimi sürdürmeye ve tırmanmayı önlemeye dayandığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bağlamda Türk-Yunan ilişkileri, ittifak politikasına dair daha geniş bir örüntüyü ortaya koymaktadır: kurumlar, rekabeti ortadan kaldırarak değil, onu soğurarak ve kontrol altına alarak istikrarı sürdürebilir.

1. Introduction

Türkiye and Greece have always been valuable allies for NATO because they are located at a strategic hinge on the western edge of Eurasia. However, their bilateral disputes have also posed a considerable burden to the Alliance and quite often threatened to paralyze NATO's entire southeastern flank. The North Atlantic Treaty is often castigated for lacking a crisis management principle. Yet NATO has managed to keep Türkiye and Greece under the same roof while preserving a degree of operational readiness. This raises a broader question: how is such an "odd couple" accommodated within an alliance in practice? More specifically, how can an alliance effectively manage the conflictual relationship between two indispensable allies in order to harness their collective strategic value?

Much of the extensive literature on Greek–Turkish relations has focused on the sources of rivalry, crisis, and enduring antagonism. Even when periods of rapprochement are examined, they are usually interpreted within a broader framework of cyclical crises and structural conflict (Aydin & Ifantis, 2004; Christofis & Deriziotis, 2023; Katsoulas, 2021). What is largely overlooked, however, is that institutional imperatives and strategic calculations have compelled the two countries to cooperate within NATO in certain aspects—in breadth, if not in depth. This article therefore focuses on the practical dimension of their required coexistence within NATO, examining how functional breadth compensated for the absence of deeper political reconciliation.

This article aims to supplement and refine the realist institutionalist perspective, which posits that NATO has not managed to resolve the problems between Türkiye and Greece. Rather than concentrating on the limits of conflict resolution, this study explores the *modus vivendi* of their common NATO membership. The concept of cautious coexistence is introduced to describe a distinct mode of institutional conflict management within NATO. It refers to the sustained interaction of rival states within an alliance, combining operational coordination with restrained political engagement and a deliberate avoidance of destabilizing initiatives. Rather than actively seeking to resolve bilateral disputes, this condition is sustained through procedural neutrality and controlled inertia: the conscious avoidance of intrusive mediation or bold political initiatives, coupled with the maintenance of routine institutional interaction sufficient to prevent escalation. Cautious coexistence thus denotes an arrangement in which rival allies continue to operate side by side, cooperating where necessary while refraining from actions that might intensify tensions or competition. Prioritizing operational breadth over political depth emerged as NATO's most pragmatic principle of conflict management.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative, theory-informed, case-based approach grounded in the relevant literature of security and alliance studies. It examines the practical cases where Türkiye and Greece have had to cooperate as allies within NATO from their accession in 1952 to 2026. The empirical analysis draws on a purposive selection of NATO exercises, operations, and institutional practices in which both countries participated, focusing on cases that illustrate patterns of operational coordination under conditions of political tension. These include military exercises during the Cold War, as well as participation in NATO operations and exercises in the post–Cold War period. It also examines the ways in which NATO and the two countries sought to manage the obstacles encountered along the way, including the avoidance of politically sensitive issues and the development of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs). The analysis draws on primary and secondary sources, including NATO documents, archival material, policy statements,

and scholarly literature. This article contributes to the literature on alliances and intra-alliance conflict by refining a conceptual understanding of alliance management and demonstrating how institutional practices can sustain cooperation in the absence of political reconciliation.

The article proceeds in four parts. It begins by framing the theoretical challenge of managing conflictual partnerships within alliances, tempering institutionalist expectations with geopolitical realities and using the relationship between Türkiye and Greece within NATO as an empirical exemplar. It then traces the development of their cautious coexistence during the Cold War before examining the intricacies of their cooperation during the post-Cold War period. Finally, it argues that cautious coexistence has constituted NATO's most realistic and effective strategy for managing Greek-Turkish tensions over the long term.

2. Framing the Problem: Avoid Dulling “The Tip of The Allies’ Sword”

“With one diplomatic stroke, the tip of the Allies’ sword was brought to the Soviet’s belly”; this is how Admiral Robert B. Carney described the accession of Türkiye and Greece to NATO, considering it no less than “the most significant Soviet setback during the entire Cold War period” (Carney, 1955, para. 31). The reason lay in geopolitics. In the wake of the Korean War, their admission in 1952 was deemed integral to the strategy of containment, extending NATO’s reach beyond the North Atlantic to the Mediterranean and strengthening its footprint from the Balkans to the Middle East, while constraining Russia’s only outlet into warm waters (NATO SHAPE, 1953, p. 388). Indeed, the Mediterranean was regarded as the area offering NATO the greatest chance to counter a Soviet attack (NATO SHAPE, 1976, p. 21). As Richard Haass later observed, Türkiye and Greece “together (...) provide a basis for the United States to project and sustain military force on and around the European continent in peacetime and wartime alike” (Haass, 1998, p. 61).

At the same time, NATO’s southeastern flank has been marred by the longstanding Turkish-Greek dispute, posing a persistent threat of war between the two allies (Bahcheli, 1990, p. 20; Lesser, 2000, pp. 31-32). The North Atlantic Treaty states that parties involved in a conflict should seek peaceful solutions without endangering international peace and security, and should refrain from the use of force or threats contrary to the purposes of the United Nations (Akbat ve Şahin, 2022, s. 22). NATO has not been successful in finding a solution to the Turkish-Greek disputes, even as it has inadvertently served as a helpful framework for preventing the escalation of large-scale war (Aydın & Ifantis, 2004, p. 4; Hatzivassiliou, 2012, pp. 515-516; Oğuzlu, 2004, pp. 461-463; Rizas, 2009, p. 368). Although NATO has adopted a stance of neutrality regarding the Turkish-Greek dispute, it has been argued that NATO’s policy has reinforced the perception of biased treatment by the alliance towards one party or the other (Haass, 1998, p. 61; Rumelili, 2004).

The conflictual relationship between the two allies within NATO has long puzzled scholars and observers alike. NATO’s “oddest couple,” in David Binder’s words, has followed parallel courses within the alliance, selectively participating in common actions while remaining aloof in others—including Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. As Binder observes, their membership “may have helped prevent a fifth Greek-Turkish war, but more likely it was the intervention of high-ranking US diplomats and military officers that restrained itchy trigger fingers” (Binder, 2012, p. 105). Fotios Moustakis argues that NATO in the Eastern Mediterranean has failed to evolve into a pluralistic security community in which war among members becomes unthinkable. Instead, limited cooperation coexists with persistent rivalry, mutual suspicion, and unresolved sovereignty disputes, sustaining strategic and economic competition in what he terms a hybrid security environment (Moustakis, 2003, p. 8). Similarly, Tarik Oğuzlu contends that joint membership in

NATO has not enabled Türkiye and Greece to resolve their long-standing disputes, as the two states neither adjusted their behaviors to each other's needs nor developed collective identities and interests that sociological and neoliberal institutionalist theories expected for a regional security community (Oğuzlu, 2004, pp. 458-478). Even NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, according to Lampas and Filis, has done little in recent years to de-escalate Greek–Turkish tensions, which continue to threaten Alliance cohesion despite the growing importance of the Eastern Mediterranean and renewed NATO engagement in the region (Lampas & Filis, 2023, pp. 39-40).

In a seminal article on NATO and the Greco-Turkish conflict, Ronald Krebs introduces the concept of “perverse institutionalism,” arguing that alliances may fail to resolve disputes among members and can, under certain conditions, even exacerbate them (Krebs, 1999, pp. 343-377). Rather than assuming that institutions automatically foster cooperation, Krebs demonstrates that alliances can intensify rivalries by altering incentives, redistributing capabilities, and creating additional arenas in which disputes can be pursued. From this perspective, institutions shape the strategic environment within which states interact, but they do not necessarily mitigate underlying political conflicts. Alliances may reduce the likelihood of war between members in some cases, yet they may simultaneously reinforce suspicions, encourage competition, and generate new patterns of bargaining and pressure. In the case of Türkiye and Greece, NATO did not eliminate rivalry, but it influenced the manner in which that rivalry was expressed and managed over time. This insight provides a useful starting point for understanding intra-alliance tensions, but it leaves open an important question: if alliances neither resolve disputes nor remain neutral arenas of interaction, how do they actually function in practice when enduring rivalries persist among their members?

The purpose of this article is to supplement realist institutionalism by expanding the analytical focus from the perverseness of intra-alliance conflict to the mechanisms through which such conflicts are managed in practice. While it is true that tensions between Türkiye and Greece persisted, the alliance has still allowed them to coexist under the same institutional framework for several decades. The article examines specific instances in which the two countries have operated within NATO structures, such as joint military exercises, operational participation or strategy planning. By highlighting these examples of cooperation, it is demonstrated that, even in the face of ongoing tensions, NATO has still played a role in facilitating cautious coexistence between Türkiye and Greece. This logic was encapsulated in the so-called Luns Doctrine, an informal policy developed under Secretary General Joseph Luns in the late 1970s, which sought to prevent NATO procedures and activities from becoming instruments in bilateral disputes by deflecting politically sensitive issues from alliance processes (Embassy Ankara, 2009).

Between the naive expectation of fostering institutional trust and the complete denunciation of alliance mechanisms, lies a more pragmatic logic of alliance management. This may be described as controlled inertia: refraining from accepting accountability for resolving a dispute while ensuring that the situation does not spill out of control. States might indeed feel mistreated if an institution does not take a favorable position when they feel their interests are harmed. But they might feel even more threatened if the institution takes a bold initiative that could endanger their core interests. A carefully maintained hands-off posture of procedural neutrality may, in fact, be a necessary condition for cautious coexistence to endure over the long run.

The more an institution strives to maintain impartiality, the less threatened both states actually feel, as they perceive a reduced risk of permanently compromising their interests. Conversely, any attempt by the

institution to actively intervene in resolving their disputes might engender a sense of vulnerability for both countries. Therefore, while it is important to recognize and address any potential sources of tension within an alliance, it is also important to recognize the stabilizing role that limited engagement and non-intrusive institutional routines can play in promoting coexistence and mitigating conflicts. This is not to say that NATO's neutrality principle eliminated contestation; rather, both sides continued to challenge NATO's stance whenever they believed impartiality had been applied inconsistently or at their expense. For Türkiye, the Luns Doctrine at times represented protection against the institutionalization of Greek claims through NATO activities (Embassy Ankara, 2008a; Embassy Ankara, 2008b); for Greece, it was perceived as excessive restraint that could indirectly legitimize Turkish objections or exclude parts of Greek territory from alliance planning (Embassy Athens, 2010). In this sense, the doctrine functioned less as a peace formula than as NATO's institutional survival tool for managing an otherwise corrosive intra-alliance rivalry.

While participation in joint exercises cannot be equated to full-fledged cooperation, it serves as a tangible manifestation of continued institutional engagement. Joint exercises enhance interoperability and readiness, sharing expertise and strengthening NATO's collective defense capabilities. By engaging in military-to-military cooperation, NATO members should not be realistically expected to build trust and foster better understanding when bilateral disputes remain unresolved, but rather to self-interestedly demonstrate their continued relevance and value to the alliance. While individual countries may have different roles within the operations, participation reflects not the resolution of conflict, but the continued calculation that remaining within the alliance serves national interests better than disengagement.

Yet, sustaining such an equilibrium proved a recurring challenge for NATO, as tensions between Türkiye and Greece repeatedly rekindled and periodically disrupted alliance routines. The following sections examine NATO exercises, operations, and CBMs not as evidence of reconciliation, but as empirical manifestations of cautious coexistence in practice.

3. In Search of Cooperation During the Cold War: From Longstep to A Step Too Long

The early years of Turkish and Greek membership were marked by harmony. At the time, they were not yet preoccupied with bilateral quarrels, while entry into NATO meant admission to an influential club of major powers, bringing both countries “in from the outposts” and putting them “on their best behavior,” eager to impress the leading allies and demonstrate that they were deserving members (Brewster, 1991, pp. 17-19). SACEUR General Dwight Eisenhower was encouraged by the high morale of both armed forces and by “the outspoken willingness of these two erstwhile enemies for friendly cooperation” (NATO SHAPE, 1953, p. 381). Geopolitical priorities were strong enough to temper even deeply rooted historical narratives, as reflected in the limited scope of the 500th anniversary celebrations of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1953 (Emen-Gökatalay, 2021, pp. 532–533).

Their strategic value rested on their interoperability. As U.S. diplomat Robert Dillon explained, “Greece and Turkey were viewed as one in the sense that although Turkey may have been the key element because of its location, the cooperation between the two in defense of the eastern flank of NATO was vital and the strength much greater than if each country worked alone” (Dillon, 1990, p. 28). In practical terms, upon joining NATO, Türkiye and Greece committed 29 active divisions to the Alliance. The exact method of integrating these forces into the existing command structure was initially unclear. Proposals for separate

commands were swiftly rejected, because they “would have entailed the division between two commands of the responsibility for the defense of Thrace, which, though separated politically between Türkiye and Greece, is geographically one area” (NATO SHAPE, 1953, pp. 373–374).

The importance of defending Thrace as a single operational problem was underscored by both Eisenhower and Deputy SACEUR Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery during their visits to Türkiye and Greece in the spring of 1952. Had this area been lost, the Soviet Union would have gained a major strategic advantage. Accordingly, the wider sub-theater of the Straits, Turkish and Greek Thrace, and Macedonia had to be held at all costs, requiring close cooperation on the two allies’ inner flanks and, if necessary, a joint Greek-Turkish force (NATO SHAPE, 1953, pp. 383–387).

To institutionalize this logic, SACEUR General Matthew Ridgway created a distinct southeastern command in August 1952. Allied Land Forces South-Eastern Europe (LANDSOUTHEAST) had its headquarters in Izmir and an advance post in Thessaloniki, and was commanded by an American general supported by Turkish and Greek deputies. In October 1953, the Sixth Allied Tactical Air Force (6 ATAF) was established to oversee the air defense of both countries (Ismay, 1954, p. 73; NATO JFC Naples, n.d.-c; Pedlow, 2009, p. 3). These structures reflected a basic strategic truth: the southeastern flank could not be defended effectively unless Türkiye and Greece functioned together. Close operational coordination was considered essential, and air and naval support were to be employed jointly in case of Soviet advances into either country (NATO SHAPE, 1976, pp. 37–38, 52). In peacetime, these commands focused on contingency planning, training, and preparation for emergencies, thereby reinforcing the importance of joint military exercises (North Atlantic Council, 1956).

During the 1950s, NATO reinforced this logic through several large-scale exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean. Their principal purpose was to test and improve coordination and cooperation between the forces of Türkiye, Greece, and other member states. They also aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of various strategies and tactics—such as air defense and amphibious landings—in the event of a surprise attack by the enemy. Additionally, these exercises allowed for the identification and correction of weaknesses in communication, radar coverage, and other areas.

The first major exercise of this kind was Longstep, which took place in November 1952. This multinational exercise was designed primarily “to create a spirit of cordial collaboration”, as Admiral Carney emphasized (New York Times, 1952, p. 14). Turkish and Greek forces were integrated into the scenario, which simulated Allied efforts to expel enemy forces from positions in the Eastern Mediterranean, culminating in an amphibious landing near Izmir. The main takeaway was that effective air defense required unified air traffic control under a single coordinating authority (NATO AIRSOUTH, 1952, p. 37; U.S. Navy, 1953, pp. 20–21). More exercises followed, revealing various weaknesses in communications and equipment. The greatest obstacle, however, proved political rather than technical: the re-emergence of age-old animosities.

The events of 6–7 September 1955 had significant repercussions for both Turkish-Greek relations and the functioning of NATO. The recall of Greek officers from Izmir and the withdrawal of Greek vessels from exercise Medflex Champion (22–30 September) not only limited the exercise’s scope but also raised concerns within SHAPE about the reduced capability of the Izmir headquarters to operate in an emergency. Greek NATO staff in Izmir resumed their duties two years later, only after Athens secured several conditions, including strict avoidance of direct Greek–Turkish military contact and arrangements

prohibiting Greek officers from visiting Türkiye and Turkish officers from being posted to Greece (Stergiou, 2021, p. 29).

The Cyprus situation further worsened in 1958, leading Greece again to withdraw its military and civilian personnel from the joint headquarters in Izmir, thereby dealing “an undoubted blow to NATO” and “destroying the illusion of a unified international command” (Baldwin, 1958, p. 4). This second withdrawal was interpreted as an expression of Greece's disappointment with NATO's policy of maintaining equal distances between the two countries. SACEUR General Lauris Norstad expressed concern that the Greek withdrawal placed SHAPE in a difficult operational position. The unresolved political conditions also resulted in the complete cancellation of exercise Flame Tide, scheduled for September 1958 (NATO, 1959, p. 5). Only after the London and Zurich Agreements of 1959 did tensions temporarily ease and military exercises resume.

Growing concerns that the USSR might attempt to exploit NATO's southern flank prompted calls for greater attention to the region (Allport, 2018, pp. 9–10; Grove & Till, 1989, pp. 278–279). A Greek request in late 1960 to apply the Forward Defense strategy in northern Greece led to the development of contingency plans and measures to strengthen both the Turkish and Greek armies (Palmer, 2019, p. 37). Southern Express, held in Greece in the autumn of 1962, was the first Allied Mobile Force exercise. The launch of the Deep Furrow series in 1964 introduced regular airborne and amphibious drills hosted in Türkiye and Greece (NATO, 1969, September 18).

However, the outbreak of intercommunal violence in Cyprus in 1963–1964 severely strained NATO's southeastern defense posture and military planning. As Türkiye temporarily withdrew forces from NATO command for possible operations linked to Cyprus, Greece responded by withdrawing selected army, navy, and air force units in order to meet its commitments toward Cyprus and recalled once again its personnel from the NATO headquarters in Izmir (The New York Times, 1964, p. 1). The crisis also resulted in the cancellation of two important NATO exercises—Eastern Express in Türkiye and Deep Furrow in Greece (Hatzivassiliou, 2006, p. 165).

By the late 1960s, large-scale exercises in the region had largely ceased for several reasons, including the drawdown of the British Mediterranean Fleet, France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated military structure in 1966, the reorganization of southern command structures, as well as the recurrence of Turkish-Greek tensions, culminating in the 1967 Cyprus crisis (NATO JFC Naples, n.d.-b). To mitigate disruption, Türkiye and Greece agreed to a policy of exercise rotation, under which the ACE Mobile Force alternated annually between the two countries as host nation. Where rotation proved impossible, both would instead participate in AFSOUTH-sponsored Deep Furrow exercises (Pistotti, 1967). These arrangements did not solve political disputes, but they preserved military functionality by adapting procedures to political realities.

NATO pursued similar pragmatism at sea. In response to increased Soviet naval activity in the region, NATO established the Naval On-Call Force for the Mediterranean (NAVOCFOR MED) in 1969. Over the following twenty years, it was activated 43 times, before being replaced by a permanent force in 1991 (NATO, 1992, p. 113). It was not permanently in-being but assembled when called upon. Yet even this functional innovation generated bilateral friction. A major dispute emerged over the level of operational control for the force in times of tension or crisis: Greece favored delegation to Mediterranean commanders,

while Türkiye considered this unacceptable. Rather than forcing a settlement, the Military Committee recommended deferring the problem until sufficient experience had been gained through scheduled peacetime operations (Palaogopoulos, 1969).

As the strategic balance in the Mediterranean shifted in favor of the USSR and the Yom Kippur War exposed new vulnerabilities, NATO sought to enhance conventional defenses and strengthen flank reinforcement. Exercise Deep Furrow resumed in 1973, with Greek, Turkish, British, and American forces training together across Thrace, the Aegean, and the Eastern Mediterranean (Palmer, 2019, p. 56). This renewed operational momentum proved short-lived. Following the 1974 Cyprus crisis, Greece withdrew from NATO's integrated military structure altogether. As the Cyprus crisis deepened, disputes in the Aegean Sea over territorial waters and airspace further complicated alliance planning, culminating in the 1976 Aegean crisis (Katsoulas, 2021, Ch. 6; Küçük & Aksu, 2018, ss. 221–222).

Yet NATO still regarded the area as indispensable. As Ruiz Palmer notes, NATO planning and exercises during this period rested on the assumption that deterrence and defense in Western Europe depended on protecting five interdependent strategic “hinges,” one of which encompassed northern Greece, western Türkiye, the southern Black Sea, and the central and eastern Mediterranean Sea. Preventing the Soviet envelopment of Greece and the geographic isolation of Türkiye from the rest of the Alliance—scenarios rehearsed in Warsaw Pact exercises Soyuz 78, Shchit 82, and Soyuz 84—became a central operational priority (Palmer, 2018, pp. 64–65).

These operational requirements coincided, though, with continuing institutional strain. Greek withdrawal left the southeastern commands operationally dependent on Turkish formations, while key U.S.-held posts in LANDSOUTHEAST were transferred to Turkish officers. Although these arrangements ensured continuity in planning and command, they ran counter to NATO's preference for balanced multinational structures and underscored the extent to which political disputes reshaped alliance procedures. In effect, military necessity preserved functionality, but only through politically improvised institutional adjustments. Greek forces eventually returned to the integrated military structure in October 1980 following a compromise proposal developed by SACEUR General Bernard W. Rogers (NATO JFC Naples, n.d.-a).

The cumulative outgrowth of all these recurring crises was the so-called Luns Doctrine, named after Secretary General Joseph Luns. At its core, the doctrine held that NATO should remain detached from disputed issues: the Alliance would continue planning, exercising, and operating, but without allowing maps, exercise scenarios, overflights, command arrangements, or terminology to become venues through which either side could “score points at the expense of the other” (Embassy Athens, 2009, para. 2). The Luns Doctrine thus encapsulated NATO's pragmatic approach to crisis management: rather than adjudicating sovereignty disputes, it maintained strict neutrality and avoided letting routine activities create political or legal precedents. In practice, it was less a doctrine of conflict resolution than one of conflict containment—keeping NATO functional by preventing ordinary procedures from becoming instruments of rivalry.

Nevertheless, Greek–Turkish disputes repeatedly surfaced during NATO exercises, rendering the activities of the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean a recurring source of friction between the two allies. As CINCSOUTH Admiral Crowe complained, in the heat of the Cold War, “60 percent of his time was spent on Greek/Turkish issues” (Thompson, 1994, p. 63). Despite persistent political tensions and heated rhetoric,

NATO's military activity in the Southern Region did not decline during the 1980s. NATO continued to rehearse rapid reinforcement of both countries through exercises conducted within the Autumn Forge framework, including Deep Furrow and Display Determination (Palmer, 2018, p. 68).

This Cold War record reveals a consistent pattern: when reconciliation proved unattainable, NATO preserved cooperation through procedural neutrality, institutional adaptation, and controlled inertia. Operational breadth, rather than political depth, became the practical basis of stability on the Alliance's southeastern flank.

Table 1. Selected Cold War NATO military exercises involving Türkiye and Greece

Exercise	Dates	Description
Long Step	3-13 November 1952	To test sea, air, and land forces of NATO's southern members in convoy, submarine, amphibious, air-defense, and interception procedures, and to provide experience in planning and executing a theater-wide operation.
Weld Fast	30 September-7 October 1953	To test air-ground coordination for the defense of Greek and Turkish Thrace, and to test the employment of carrier-based aircraft in support of land operations.
November Moon	2-5 November 1953	To test coordination among air-defense systems in Southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Malta, Türkiye, and France).
Keystone	September-October 1954	Major joint and combined exercise in Greece, Türkiye, and the Eastern Mediterranean, testing responses to a potential large-scale attack in the region.
Medflex Champion	22-30 September 1955	Exercise in the Eastern Mediterranean; Greece withdrew following the events of September 1955.
Medflex Dragon	April 1956	Fleet exercise in the Eastern Mediterranean, described by CINAFMED as the most successful exercise conducted to date.
Deep Water	September 1957	NATO naval exercise in the Mediterranean simulating the defense of the Dardanelles and control of access between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.
Full Play	June 1958	Major NATO air exercise conducted in the North-Western NATO region, involving multiple Allied air forces, including Greece and Türkiye, designed to test air defense coordination, interception procedures, and integrated command and control across the Alliance.
Flame Tide	September 1958	To test the capabilities of ground forces in northern Greece and Turkish Thrace; cancelled due to the Cyprus crisis.
Crescent Mace	September 1959	Minor fleet exercise in Greece, Türkiye, and surrounding waters, conducted in two phases: a combined atomic-strike exercise and a combined direct-support exercise.
Southern Express	Autumn 1962	The first live Allied Mobile Force (AMF) exercise, intended to demonstrate that all Allies would enjoy equal protection through reinforcement.
Deep Furrow	1964-1969; 1973	Annual exercises in Türkiye and Greece to maintain and improve readiness for wartime missions. Land forces maneuvered in northwestern Türkiye, naval forces exercised in the Eastern Mediterranean (including the

		Aegean Sea), and NATO air units provided fighter-bomber support and photo reconnaissance.
Autumn Forge	1976-1990	Series of large-scale exercises held across the Alliance—from northern Norway to eastern Türkiye—to train, test, and improve the full range of military operations.

Note: This table was prepared by the authors based on information from NATO (<https://www.nato.int/>).

4. In Search of a Modus Operandi After the Cold War

In the post-Cold War period, Türkiye and Greece continued to make significant contributions to NATO despite their persistent disputes. Their relationship remained distinctly paradoxical: tensions frequently escalated, yet both countries continued to play important roles within the same alliance. This section examines NATO operations, joint exercises and institutional adjustments to show how cautious coexistence functioned under the new strategic environment. Although these “enemy twins” (Binder, 2012, p. 95) within NATO pursued different political priorities and remained strategic competitors, they repeatedly participated in systemic and sub-systemic security tasks when broader alliance interests required it.

The 1990s marked a period of transition for both NATO and Turkish-Greek relations. Following the collapse of the USSR, NATO sought to adapt to a new security landscape by broadening its focus beyond traditional threats and adopting a more multidimensional approach to security. The emergence of new actors, impulses and norms meant that regional and international organizations assumed a larger role in addressing conflicts before, during, and after their outbreak (Demirdöğen, 2011, ss. 157-159; Kınacıoğlu, 2017, pp. 90-91; Özerdem, 2013, ss. 57-87). Meanwhile, Türkiye and Greece experienced recurring bilateral crises from 1994 to 1999, with the Kardak/Imia crisis almost leading to military conflict. Yet even during this volatile period, both countries contributed to NATO missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Horn of Africa, sometimes operating in parallel despite diverging political positions.

The power vacuum created by the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the Balkans—a region of deep historical and cultural significance for both countries—threatened their immediate strategic environment while also creating opportunities to expand regional influence. Although Türkiye and Greece adopted different policies, they also had to respond collectively as NATO members. In this context, both countries participated in ground operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo and contributed to stabilization efforts in Albania through Operation Alba (Lesser, 2000, p. 13).

During the Bosnian war, Türkiye positioned itself as an early and active supporter of Bosnia’s sovereignty, recognizing independence ahead of both the United States and the European Community. As U.S. policy moved toward coercive diplomacy, Türkiye became a valuable diplomatic channel to the Bosnian leadership. Senior U.S. officials maintained close contact with Ankara during the road to Dayton. This diplomatic activism was matched by operational burden-sharing. Türkiye contributed aircraft to the enforcement of the no-fly zone and supported NATO/UN maritime enforcement in the Adriatic through Operation Sharp Guard. In this way, Türkiye acted both as an advocate of stronger allied action and as a practical contributor to NATO’s evolving role in Bosnia (Güven & Krupaliija, 2025).

Greece, by contrast, adopted a cautious and often ambivalent stance during the Yugoslav Wars. Strong public sympathy for Serbia, rooted in cultural and religious affinities, constrained government policy. Yet

Athens also sought to uphold its obligations as a member of NATO and the European Union. In practice, Greece contributed to NATO's Implementation Force (IFOR) in 1995 by deploying a transport company of roughly 250 personnel, supported by airlift assets, naval units, and staff officers. Greek forces played a significant logistical and humanitarian role, conducting large-scale transport and supply missions in support of stabilization and reconstruction. This calibrated involvement reflected a broader pattern of cautious coexistence: even when political positions diverged, operational cooperation continued in forms compatible with national constraints (Heraclides, 2001, p. 4; Nation, 2003).

The result was not policy convergence, but functional participation—an outcome characteristic of alliance management in conditions of internal disagreement. In a meeting held in Istanbul in June 1998, Türkiye and Greece tried to coordinate positions on Kosovo, but no agreement was achieved (Demirtaş Coşkun, 2010, s. 61).

The same pattern reappeared during the Kosovo crisis in 1999. Türkiye supported NATO's mission from the outset. The Turkish parliament authorized participation within the NATO framework, citing both regional stability and historical-cultural ties to Kosovo (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, 1998, pp. 354–355). Turkish F-16s initially flew protective missions and later participated in strikes against Serbian military targets, demonstrating Ankara's willingness to assume a visible combat role within NATO operations (Molla, 2009). Greece, by contrast, expressed reservations about the air campaign, citing both historical ties with Serbia and concerns about broader regional precedents affecting its own security environment. Official policy therefore sought to maintain a delicate balance: Athens provided humanitarian support and avoided direct confrontation with Serbia while remaining aligned with its Western partners and fulfilling alliance obligations. In practice, Greece supported NATO by granting access to its territory and infrastructure and by contributing forces to stabilization and support missions in the wider Balkan theater. As in Bosnia, its role remained primarily logistical, humanitarian, and support-oriented rather than combat-focused (Armakolas & Karabairis, 2011, pp. 94–98; Kontonis, 2003, pp. 515–516).

At the same time, Turkish and Greek military forces cooperated on humanitarian tasks, delivering supplies, reinforcements, and relief assistance to front-line areas (Oğuzlu, 2004, p. 474). Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreou later described this moment as a “historic opportunity,” noting that it generated valuable “trust capital” between the two countries (Yeni Şafak, 1999). The Kosovo case thus reinforced a recurring post–Cold War pattern: alliance cohesion did not depend on uniform threat perceptions or identical political positions. Bilateral disagreement did not prevent participation in alliance operations, nor did NATO seek to impose policy convergence. Instead, institutional routines, division of labor, and procedural neutrality allowed both countries to remain engaged in ways consistent with their national constraints, illustrating how alliances manage “uneasy partners” by prioritizing functionality over unanimity.

This limited but tangible cooperation also fed into the broader Turkish–Greek rapprochement of the late 1990s. The role of foreign ministers İsmail Cem and George Papandreou was instrumental in fostering dialogue, while the devastating earthquakes that struck both countries in close succession in 1999 strengthened public solidarity and improved the political atmosphere (Yazgan, 2015, pp. 116–117). By the end of that year, Türkiye and Greece had signed several agreements on so-called “low-politics” issues, including combating crime, environmental protection, illegal immigration, and cultural exchange (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2008, pp. 125–126). Within NATO, confidence-building measures followed, including mutual

notification of planned exercises and the establishment of direct communication channels designed to reduce misunderstandings.

Following NATO's post-Cold War command restructuring, the joint headquarters in Izmir and Larissa were reorganized on a more multinational basis, including the reciprocal posting of Greek and Turkish officers to improve planning and reinforcement coordination (Naumann, 1999). Within this framework, tensions eased and exercises resumed with Greek participation. The Dynamic Mix 1998 Wargame marked the return of NATO exercises to the Aegean after a thirteen-year hiatus. The most significant regional exercise was Dynamic-Mix 2000, conducted in the spirit of rapprochement (Aksu, 2001, s. 115). The exercise aimed to demonstrate how political rapprochement could translate into renewed military cooperation between Türkiye and Greece. In a notable event, Turkish warplanes landed on Greek soil for a common purpose, twenty-eight years after a brief visit in 1972. Greek warplanes reciprocated by landing on Turkish air bases, while Greek warships anchored in Turkish ports during Distant Glory 2000.

In the wake of 9/11, a new security environment emerged that reaffirmed the strategic value of both Türkiye and Greece. Although neither country engaged in major direct combat operations in Afghanistan or Iraq, both supported these missions in other critical ways (Binder, 2012, p. 96). Türkiye assumed a more active role in military training, advisory tasks, medical support, and humanitarian activities, while Greece focused on infrastructure projects and the training of Afghan military personnel. Türkiye deployed thousands of troops and contributed to initiatives such as the Afghan National Army Trust Fund and the Helicopter Initiative; Greece, though contributing a smaller number of troops, played a meaningful role through development programs and logistical support for the Afghan Air Force. Together, both countries contributed to NATO's broader effort to promote security and stability in Afghanistan.

Cooperation between Türkiye and Greece also proved possible in fields not directly related to core sovereignty or national security concerns, where shared interests and practical considerations outweigh political rivalry. For instance, both countries participated in operations beyond their immediate region, such as Operation Ocean Shield in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden. Piracy and armed robbery in these waters posed security threats to international trade and maritime security, including shipping routes vital to the Mediterranean region. The mission aimed to protect humanitarian shipments to Somalia and secure one of the world's busiest maritime corridors. Between its launch in 2009 and its conclusion in 2016, it contributed to a substantial reduction in piracy and armed robbery incidents (NATO, n.d., Operation Ocean Shield).

Türkiye joined the Joint Task Force and the NATO Permanent Maritime Task Group in 2009, contributing seventy-six Turkish-flagged merchant vessels to support operations in the Gulf of Aden. It also took command of the task force on multiple occasions, with naval task groups—consisting of three frigates and a replenishment ship—supporting operations in 2011. For its part, Greece was actively involved in Operation Active Endeavour, a Mediterranean patrol mission aimed at deterring and countering terrorist activity. NATO facilities at Souda Bay played a vital role in supporting all NATO operations in the region (Skordeli, 2012; Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, 2012, p. 32).

Both countries also participated in numerous Alliance exercises, designed to improve interoperability and operational readiness. Examples of exercises involving both countries include: Cooperative Partner, designed to enhance interoperability and regional security cooperation; Dynamic Guard, focusing on air

defense and interoperability; Trident Jaguar, emphasizing land, air, and naval coordination; Trident Lance, a 24/7 readiness exercise forcing LANDCOM to reassess baseline employment requirements; and Trident Juncture, a large-scale exercise testing NATO's crisis response and collective defense capabilities (NATO, 2015; NATO, 2016). As Admiral James Foggo noted, cooperation between Türkiye and Greece within NATO frameworks has at times produced “very bright spots” even amid tension, particularly in joint efforts such as migration control in the Aegean (Nedos, 2018).

Yet, the old issues never disappeared. The demilitarization status of the eastern Aegean islands remained a potential flashpoint. In 2009, tensions increased following NATO's participation in exercise Noble Archer, which included an overflight of Agios Efstratios, a Greek island in the northern Aegean that Türkiye argues should be demilitarized under existing agreements. In a cable from Ankara, U.S. Ambassador James Jeffrey urged the “vigorous application” of the Luns Doctrine, namely the avoidance of actions that could aggravate tensions or imply support for either side (Embassy Ankara, 2009, para. 6). “To help ensure Greece-Turkey relations do not go off track,” Jeffrey argued, “it is imperative that NATO stay out of Greece-Turkey bilateral disputes and [avoid] participation in national exercises involving islands whose militarization status is in dispute” (Embassy Ankara, 2009, para. 1). Amid renewed tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2018, NATO commanders continued to rely on and apply the logic of the Luns Doctrine, emphasizing that allies remain “stronger together” even in periods of heightened friction (Nedos, 2018).

This approach illustrates a recurring feature of alliance management. Rather than attempting to resolve the underlying dispute, NATO sought to minimize institutional exposure to it. By avoiding actions that could be interpreted as favoring one ally over the other, the Alliance preserved its operational cohesion while leaving the political disagreement unresolved. The objective was not reconciliation, but damage limitation. Thus, NATO has managed Greek–Turkish rivalry not by eliminating it, but by containing its effects on planning, exercises, and command arrangements through procedural neutrality and pragmatic adaptation.

Recent NATO activities further reinforce the persistence of cautious coexistence in practice. Since 2022, NATO's “vigilance activities” under Project Neptune—most notably Neptune Strike and Neptune Shield—have formed a recurring operational framework designed to strengthen deterrence and readiness in response to the deteriorating European security environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Neptune Shield 2022, conducted across the Baltic, Adriatic, Ionian, and Mediterranean Seas, focused on integrating high-end maritime and expeditionary strike capabilities across air, land, and sea domains, including the coordination of carrier strike groups, amphibious forces, and marine units under NATO command structures (NATO, 2022a; NATO, 2022b; Sutton, 2022). This pattern continued in Neptune Strike 26 (2026), where both countries again operated alongside multiple Allies in a large-scale, multi-domain exercise spanning the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Baltic regions (NATO, 2026). These contemporary cases demonstrate that, even under conditions of a frozen but unresolved dispute, operational coordination between the two allies not only persists but is actively reproduced through NATO's exercise cycle, underscoring the Alliance's capacity to absorb rivalry through functional integration rather than political alignment.

In summary, both Türkiye and Greece made significant contributions to NATO operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Horn of Africa, often working in parallel despite differing political positions. Türkiye assumed leadership roles in Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa, deploying troops and providing logistical support, while Greece contributed troops and aircraft to various operations and actively participated in counterterrorism and counter-piracy efforts in the Mediterranean and

the Horn of Africa. Both countries also cooperated on humanitarian missions, particularly during the Kosovo crisis. Taken together, these cases illustrate how operational cooperation persisted even in the absence of political reconciliation, reinforcing a pattern of cautious coexistence within the alliance.

5. Channeling Friction: The Role of CBMs

To further ease tensions between Türkiye and Greece, NATO has also supported the implementation of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs). CBMs are intended to increase trust between hostile parties by making intentions and actions clearer, more predictable, and less susceptible to misinterpretation (Brauch, 1983, pp. 75–104). In the Turkish–Greek case, however, their function has been more modest and more practical. CBMs have rarely created trust in any deep political sense; rather, they have functioned as mechanisms for regulating friction, channeling competition into more predictable and manageable forms of interaction.

The foundations of this approach were laid in the Memorandum of Understanding reached by the foreign ministers Karolos Papoulias and Mesut Yılmaz on 27 May 1988. According to Fuat Aksu (2004), the final quarter of the 1990s marked a turning point in Turkish–Greek relations: despite recurring tensions over a short period, a process of dialogue and détente emerged, CBMs were introduced, alternative solutions were considered, and basic conflict issues began to be discussed.

On the sidelines of the 1997 NATO Summit in Madrid, the Madrid Memorandum was facilitated by the United States, with the involvement of the NATO Secretary General Javier Solana. Through this framework, both countries reaffirmed their obligation to respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity and agreed to refrain from interfering in national activities conducted on the high seas and in the international airspace of the Aegean, in accordance with the terms of the agreement. They further undertook to conduct such activities in line with relevant international documents, rules, and regulations governing maritime and air navigation (Küçük, 2021, s. 33). The CBMs aimed to alleviate tensions and address the lack of dialogue between the two countries, but they proved insufficient to resolve the underlying disputes (Aksu, 2010).

According to former Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs İsmail Cem, “the main purpose of the Madrid Memorandum was to control situations where the parties could be dragged into conflict like a Kardak/Imia [crisis]” (Cem, 2004, s. 89). The central feature of this memorandum was the mutual commitment to refrain from unilateral actions and from harming each other's vital interests, with the overarching aim of preventing escalation into violence (Cem, 2004, ss. 90–91). Although the Turkish and Greek delegations stayed in the same hotel at the Madrid Summit, contacts were conducted through U.S. mediators, illustrating both the limits of direct engagement and the importance of third-party facilitation (Ayman, 2016, s. 479). As Greek Foreign Minister Theodoros Pangalos remarked, “We didn't solve any problems in Madrid... We established a framework to try to find ways to solve them... I suspect it will be a long process,” underscoring the limited but pragmatic ambition of the agreement as a mechanism for managing rather than resolving disputes (Bohlen, 1997, p. 11).

Since exploratory talks began in 2002, the two countries have agreed on a series of additional CBMs, some brokered at NATO meetings and others through bilateral talks. In 2003, NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson announced a new package that included cooperation between National Defense Colleges, as well as initiatives in science, environmental protection, crisis management, and disaster response, personnel

training and exchanges (NATO, 2003). During the same period, NATO Air Component Command in Izmir was established partly to accommodate some of Türkiye's concerns within the Alliance's command arrangements. More recently, following renewed tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, NATO introduced a Conflict Prevention and De-confliction Mechanism in 2020 under Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, designed to reduce the risk of incidents whether deliberate, incidental or accidental (NATO, 2020; see also International Crisis Group, 2021).

In subsequent years, confidence-building efforts continued through bilateral and NATO-supported talks aimed at maintaining communication channels, coordinating military activities, and reducing the risk of incidents at sea and in the air. These meetings did not seek to resolve underlying sovereignty disputes. Their purpose was narrower: to stabilize day-to-day interactions and prevent operational incidents from becoming political crises. They therefore illustrate the procedural logic of cautious coexistence: when agreement on substance is impossible, rules of interaction become the substitute for reconciliation (Ankahaber, 2025; Associated Press, 2025).

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate that CBMs were not designed to resolve the fundamental disputes between Türkiye and Greece, but to regulate their interaction and reduce the risks inherent in an enduring rivalry. Although often presented in diplomatic language as instruments for “building trust,” in practice CBMs functioned primarily as mechanisms for channeling friction. Acting as institutional safety valves, they often reduced the temperature of rivalry without altering its underlying causes. NATO's contribution to Greek–Turkish relations has rested less on reconciling opposing positions than on providing frameworks that contain tensions, structure competition, and enable the two allies to coexist within the Alliance despite persistent disagreements.

Table 2. Selected Turkish and Greek Participation in Post-Cold War NATO Operations

PLACE	NAME	TIME	PURPOSE
ADRIATIC SEA	OPERATION SHARP GUARD	1993-1996	Joint NATO/WEU maritime operation to enforce UN sanctions and arms embargoes during the Yugoslav wars.
BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA	IMPLEMENTATION FORCE (IFOR)	1995-1996	To implement the military aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement and stabilize Bosnia-Herzegovina following the Bosnian War.
BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA	STABILIZATION FORCE (SFOR)	1996-2004	To contribute to stabilization and support civilian implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement, facilitating long-term peace consolidation.
KOSOVO	OPERATION ALLIED FORCE	1999	NATO air campaign aimed at halting Serbian operations and addressing the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo.
KOSOVO	KOSOVO FORCE (KFOR)	1999-present	Peacekeeping mission to maintain security and stability in Kosovo following the conflict.
UNITED STATES	OPERATION EAGLE ASSIST	2001-2002	NATO AWACS deployment in support of the United States following the invocation of Article 5 after 9/11.
NORTH MACEDONIA	OPERATION ESSENTIAL HARVEST	2001	To collect and destroy weapons voluntarily surrendered by ethnic Albanian insurgents following the Ohrid Framework Agreement.
NORTH MACEDONIA	OPERATION AMBER FOX	2001-2002	To protect international monitors overseeing implementation of the peace plan.

NORTH MACEDONIA	OPERATION ALLIED HARMONY	2002-2003	To continue the protection of international observers and support stabilization efforts in North Macedonia.
NORTH MACEDONIA	OPERATION CONCORDIA	2003	To support stabilization in North Macedonia; the operation became the first EU-led military mission conducted using NATO assets under the Berlin Plus arrangements.
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN	OPERATION ACTIVE ENDEAVOUR	2001-2016	To deter, defend, and protect against terrorist activity in the Mediterranean under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.
MEDITERRANEAN	OPERATION SEA GUARDIAN	2016-present	Successor to Active Endeavour, focusing on maritime security and situational awareness.
AFGHANISTAN	INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE FORCE (ISAF)	2001-2014	To assist the Afghan government in providing security and to support the development of Afghan national security forces.
AFGHANISTAN	RESOLUTE SUPPORT MISSION (RSM)	2015-2021	To provide training, advice, and assistance to Afghan security forces and institutions, supporting capacity-building and professionalization until the Allied withdrawal in 2021.
IRAQ	NATO TRAINING MISSION	2004-2011	To assist in the training and development of Iraqi armed forces and security institutions.
LIBYA	OPERATION UNIFIED PROTECTOR	2011	To enforce a no-fly zone and protect civilians during the Libyan crisis under UN mandate.
HORN OF AFRICA	OPERATION OCEAN SHIELD	2009-2016	To combat piracy and protect maritime routes in the Gulf of Aden and surrounding waters.

Note: This table was prepared by the authors based on information from NATO (<https://www.nato.int/>).

6. Conclusion

The persistence of the Greek–Turkish rivalry within NATO is best understood not as a failure of alliance management, but as evidence of a distinct mode of institutional conflict management rooted in geopolitical necessity. Both countries occupy strategic positions that have reinforced the security of NATO’s southeastern flank, extended Allied influence across the Eastern Mediterranean, and allowed the defense of the fringes of the Warsaw Pact to be treated as a single operational problem.

This article contributes to the literature on alliances and intra-alliance conflict by introducing the concept of cautious coexistence as a framework for understanding how institutions manage rivalry in practice. Realist institutionalism, most prominently expressed in Krebs’s notion of “perverse institutionalism,” has shown how alliances may fail to resolve disputes or even exacerbate tensions among their members. Cautious coexistence complements this perspective by shifting attention from institutional failure to institutional adaptation and highlighting the stabilizing mechanisms through which alliances sustain interaction despite unresolved conflicts. This study has shown that coexistence works through routine interaction, structured coordination, and the deliberate avoidance of initiatives that might destabilize indispensable allies. The so-called Luns Doctrine represented the clearest institutional expression of this logic: NATO preserved functionality not by settling disputes, but by refusing to let ordinary alliance procedures become instruments of bilateral rivalry.

In situations where full cooperation or reconciliation remains unattainable, institutions may still play a critical role by allowing disputes to persist within manageable limits rather than attempting to impose solutions. In such contexts, the resolution of a dispute may lie not only beyond institutional capacity but may also prove detrimental to institutional cohesion. Alliances may therefore deliberately adopt a posture of procedural neutrality and controlled inertia, refraining from initiatives that could destabilize relations among indispensable members. Even without resolving underlying disagreements, institutions can sustain routine interaction, preserve channels of coordination, and maintain functional relationships that serve broader strategic purposes. The geopolitical value of member states as essential partners thus encourages alliances not to eliminate conflict, but to manage it in ways that allow cautious coexistence to endure.

The empirical record examined in this study—from Cold War exercises and command arrangements to post-Cold War operations, confidence-building measures, and de-confliction mechanisms—illustrates a recurring pattern: operational cooperation has repeatedly persisted alongside political disagreement, while disputes have been managed rather than resolved.

In this sense, while interoperability and coordination remain NATO's long-term objectives, achieving full political alignment between Türkiye and Greece has proved unrealistic. A more attainable and strategically sufficient outcome has been coexistence rather than full-fledged cooperation. The benefits of sustaining this equilibrium have consistently outweighed the risks of forcing institutional solutions that could deepen tensions. The strategic importance of the region has made disengagement or institutional separation unthinkable, reinforcing the need for mechanisms that preserve cooperation in limited but meaningful domains.

Ultimately, the Turkish-Greek case suggests a broader implication for alliance politics: the effectiveness of institutions should not be judged solely by their ability to resolve disputes, but also by their capacity to contain them, structure interaction, and prevent escalation. In this respect, cautious coexistence represents not a second-best outcome, but one of its most durable and realistic achievements.

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