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AVOIDING DISASTER IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: A LATENT TENSION INDEX FOR GREEK-TURKISH RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary history of Greek-Turkish relations is marked by persistent tensions which, following gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean, nearly escalated into a full-scale military conflict in August 2020. While outside mediation has resulted in limited rapprochement since then, both sides have also continued their hostile rhetoric and posturing, risking re-escalation. To facilitate enduring trust-building and de-escalation between the parties, it is necessary to measure and monitor the latent tension between Turkey and Greece in a real-time and transparent fashion. We present a novel tension index developed for this purpose. In order to provide a comprehensive measure of Greek-Turkish tensions, the index combines publicly available information on aerial and naval incursions, arms imports, and bilateral exploratory talks. In addition to developing the theoretical and empirical basis of the index, the project also triangulates it qualitatively against news reporting in both the Turkish and Greek media and illustrates its use by examining the quantitative relationship between Greek-Turkish tension and bilateral trade. As a transparent, real-time, and neutral measure of latent tensions between Turkey and Greece, the index will thus serve as a neutral crisis early-warning system for stakeholders in both countries, facilitating trust-building and cooperation between the two parties.

Keywords: cooperation; conflict; Greece; Turkey; tension index; Eastern Mediterranean

INTRODUCTION

The strong language exchange between Foreign Ministers Çavuşoğlu and Dendias during their official talks in April 2021 in Ankara suggests that the current state of Greek-Turkish relations is far from ideal even though the two states made significant steps towards a positive agenda and both ministers made a case against high tensions and escalatory behavior. The need for a positive agenda was stressed again by the two Foreign Ministers during their follow up meeting in Athens in May 2021 and by President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Mitsotakis after meeting in June 2021 in Brussels. The August 2020 naval standoff highlighted the escalatory potential of the Greek-Turkish dispute, yet existing measurements do not capture the increase in tension underlying the 2020 standoff. Being unable to measure rising tension in Greek-Turkish relations, stakeholders, like civil society organizations in both countries and neighboring states, were taken by surprise when the two states deployed their naval forces in the Eastern Mediterranean. To facilitate trust-building and de-escalation between the two parties, it is thus imperative to measure and monitor the latent tension between Turkey and Greece in a real-time and transparent fashion.

To that end, low intensity dispute events, like airspace violations, offer unique insights on the trajectory of Greek-Turkish relations (see Kollias 2004; Athanassiou et al. 2006). We thus introduce a new tension index based on publicly available, monthly data on airspace violations, naval incursions, arms imports, and exploratory talks to measure variations in latent tension between the two neighbors. As a transparent, replicable, and neutral measure of tension between Turkey and Greece, the index thus serves as an objective crisis early-warning system for relevant stakeholders in both countries, facilitating trust-building and cooperation between the two parties, and beyond.

Here, we discuss the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the index and triangulate it qualitatively against news reporting in both the Turkish and Greek media. Specifically, we examine how six daily, national newspapers with anti- and pro-government views portrayed bilateral relations in the periods June-July 2020 and May-June 2016. Lastly, we illustrate its use by examining the relationship between Greek-Turkish tensions and bilateral economic activity.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we present the state of affairs in Greek-Turkish relations and highlight the need for a latent tension index. We then discuss the components and construction of the index. Following this discussion, we present the two applications. In the conclusions we consider the study's implications and provide relevant policy recommendations.

BACKGROUND

The Greek-Turkish territorial dispute is a source of instability in the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean, and the threat of military escalation is ubiquitous in Greek-Turkish relations. Bilateral relations are beset by acute disagreements over the continental shelf and the delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones, the extent of territorial waters and sovereignty over islands, naval and aerial incursions, regional cooperation, and the status of Cyprus (Choulis et al. 2021). A full-scale war was averted during the Imia/Kardak 1996 crisis owing to US intervention, but the dispute persists despite Western-led diplomatic efforts as both states have adopted an intransigent, zero-sum culture (Ifantis 2009). Gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean have further aggravated the Greek-Turkish competition. In August 2020, the two navies nearly came to blows when Turkey deployed naval forces and drilling ships as a response to the newly signed Greco-Egyptian delimitation agreement. German mediation led to the termination of the military standoff after 45 days and to the resumption of exploratory talks, but tensions remain high.

While Greek-Turkish relations have not featured full-scale military action since 1974, tensions remain persistent and significant.

The August 2020 naval stand-off accentuates the potentially disastrous prospects of the Greek-Turkish rivalry with German chancellor Angela Merkel commenting that “it’s hard to imagine how small the distance between military conflict and peaceful settlement can get in some cases” (Ekathimerini 2020). Yet, the August 2020 standoff caught many observers by surprise since existing measures of the interstate dispute do not capture variations in tension at a substantively or temporally fine-grained level.

Thus, the August confrontation highlights the need to incorporate variation in low levels of contention, like airspace or naval violations, in the study of interstate dispute intensity in order to provide policymakers with detailed and current information on tension levels. A tension index would provide policymakers and other stakeholders with readily available, objective information on the level of dispute intensity on a monthly basis and would serve as an early warning system for latent escalation that may lead to a full-scale military crisis, similar to the August 2020 standoff. In doing so, it will also provide civil society with another tool to meaningfully contribute to dispute resolution in the Eastern Mediterranean via the reduction of information asymmetries between the two parties (Fearon 1995; Rauchhaus 2006).

The study of low intensity disputes can provide significant insights on Greek-Turkish relations and the factors that affect the level of tension between the two states. Existing studies focusing exclusively on airspace incursions indicate that these incidents positively affect Greek military spending while themselves being driven by Turkish defense expenditures (Kollias 2004; Choulis et al. 2021), have a meaningful impact on the Greek stock market (Athanasidou et al. 2006), and also serve domestic political purposes for the government in Ankara (Mehrl and Choulis 2021). While this research focuses only on airspace incursions, hence missing other important components of the dispute such as naval incursions or arms imports, it nonetheless suggests that studying low intensity dispute events can improve our understanding of Greek-Turkish tensions. Beyond airspace violations, naval incursions have become an important feature of the dispute, as evidenced by the Imia/Kardak crisis or the recent events involving the research activities of the survey vessel Oruç Reis in the East Mediterranean.

Similarly, the purchase of a French Rafale aircraft squadron by Greece shortly after the August standoff highlights the dispute's escalation dynamics within an arms race (Ekathimerini 2021).

In contrast, the restart of the exploratory talks between the two countries in 2021 points to a mutual willingness to consider diplomatic dispute resolution. Taking these incidents seriously enables us to measure dispute intensity more accurately in Greek-Turkish relations. Measurements based on conflict onset or militarized interstate disputes do not capture variation in underlying tension and as such miss the tension build-up that precedes a militarized crisis. The sudden escalation of the Greek-Turkish rivalry as observed in the Imia/Kardak 1995-6 crisis and the August 2020 naval standoff indicates the need of an objective tension index that will serve as an early warning system for potential escalation in the Greek-Turkish dispute.

Extending existing work on the role of airspace incursions in the Greek-Turkish context, we thus propose a tension index that accounts for a parsimonious set of additional important measures of the two countries' bilateral relationship and dispute perception.

Following the preceding discussion, it combines information on aerial and naval incursions with variables indicating the value of Greek arms imports as well as the incidence of exploratory talks. It is constructed as aerial naval incursions + arms imports - exploratory talks where incursions are scaled to range between 0 and 100, the import and talk variables between 0 and 10, and the resulting index again between 0 and 100. The index is presented in Figure 1.

The index shows that Greek-Turkish relations have undergone substantial shifts throughout the period of observation. Most noticeably, tensions were very high from mid-2019 onwards, culminating in the highest observed value during the August 2020 standoff. But even before this dispute escalation, the index suggests an increase in tensions starting in Spring 2017. In contrast, the 2-year period preceding it exhibits markedly lower tensions as monthly values often remain below average. To triangulate the index, we now investigate how the tension score corresponds to media reporting on the state of the Greek-Turkish relationship.

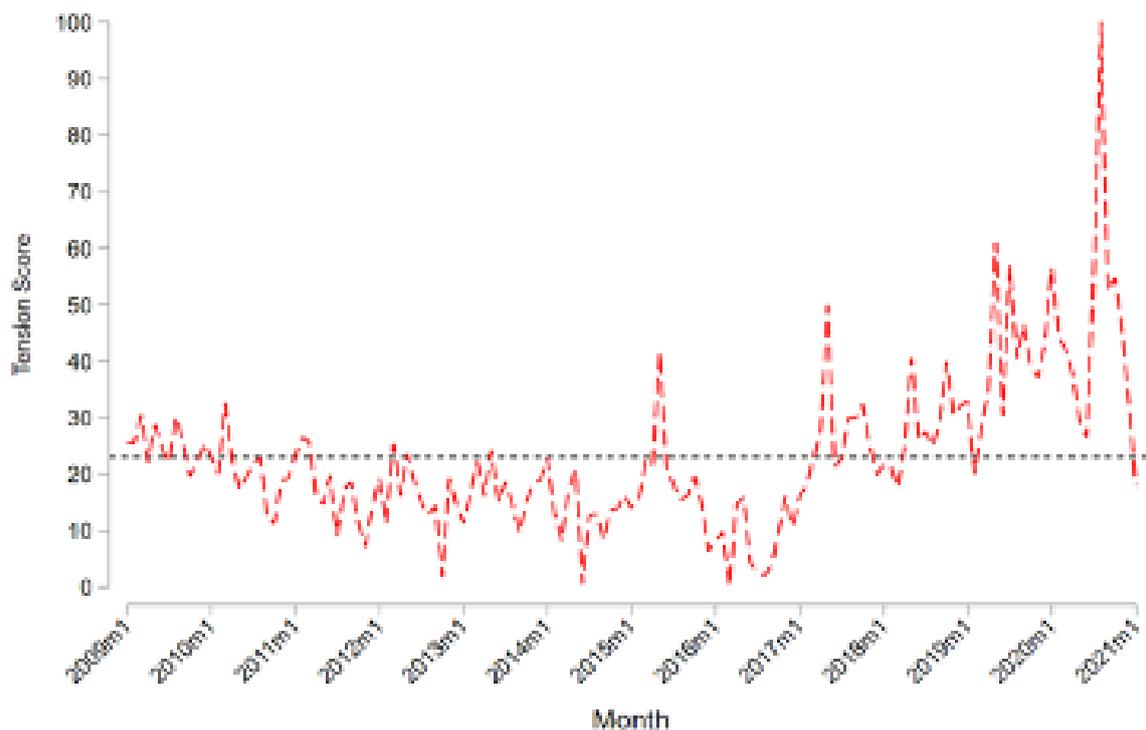


Figure 1: Greek-Turkish tension, January 2009 – January 2021. Black dashed line indicates mean tension level.

DISCUSSION

For the index to have any value, it is critical that it corresponds to real-world events. We thus first qualitatively assess its validity by evaluating its reported tension level against Greek and Turkish media reporting. This analysis illustrates that the index corresponds to informed observers' perceptions of the dispute. In a second step, we also assess the relationship between the tension index and bilateral trade, finding that rising tensions correspond to decreased economic activity between the two countries.

For the media analysis, we examine the reporting by six national newspapers in two periods which, based on the index, can respectively be classified as low- and high-tension. We selected the newspapers to include three widely circulated publications per country exhibiting both pro- and anti-government leanings. For Turkey, we looked at *Birgün*, *Cumhuriyet* and *Sabah*. *Sabah*, with an average circulation of 195.000-200.000, is a right-wing source displaying pro-government views. In contrast, *Cumhuriyet* and *Birgün*, with average circulations of 25.000-30.000 and 50.000-55.000 respectively, both exhibit leftist positions and are more critical of the current government. For the Greek media, we selected *Efsyn* as an anti-government, left-wing source, *TaNea* as a centrist source, and *Kathimerini* as a right-wing source with pro-government views. *Kathimerini* has an average daily circulation of 14.000-17.000; *TaNea* 15.000-16.000, and *Efsyn* 7.000-8.000. In searching for relevant news items, we used 'Greek-Turkish relations' as an initial keyword but further employed 'Turkey' (*Touprkia*) in the Greek and 'Greece' (*Yunanistan*) in the Turkish sources to ensure sufficient coverage. Finally, we chose the months June-July 2020 as high- and May-June 2016 as low-tension periods. We study June-July 2020 to explore whether and how Greek and Turkish media reported increasing tension in bilateral relations before the August naval standoff. We examine May-June 2016 as the most recent period of low tensions and because it precedes the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey.

The findings of this analysis are summarized in Table 1. Our reading of Turkish and Greek media indicates that news on bilateral relations is mostly centered around

five frames: 1) socio-political tension over socio-cultural symbols, arising, for example, over the status of Hagia Sophia, burning the Turkish flag, or attacks on mosques in Greece, as well as conflict over the perceived mistreatment of the Turkish speaking minority in Greece; 2) economic and military cooperation, i.e. efforts to boost security and business ties between the two states, such as, for example, economic partnerships in the Aegean and the export of Turkish drone technology to Greece; 3) De-escalation efforts, i.e. diplomatic attempts to decrease tensions between the two states, e.g. seeking diplomacy on the Eastern Mediterranean front and German mediation; 4) territorial tension, i.e. mostly verbal threats or militarized actions challenging the status-quo regarding border delimitations such as airspace violations, military build-ups in the Eastern Mediterranean, or gas explorations; and 5) the humanitarian crisis, i.e. political aspects of the refugee influx, such as, for example, irregular crossings in the Aegean, the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016, or pushbacks of asylum seekers and refugees. Except for the final category, which is predominantly featured in Turkish news reporting, these categories structure the discourse on Greek-Turkish relations in both countries.

Overall, the reporting in all six outlets indicates growing tension in bilateral relations throughout June-July 2020 but little dispute activity in May-June 2016. Most pertinently, there were 261 articles on territorial tensions in June-July 2020 but only 16 in May-June 2016. And while the Table suggests that Greek-Turkish relations were generally a more salient issue in Summer 2020 than in the earlier period, a telling exception is the topic of economic and military cooperation which was more reported on in May-June 2016. This suggests that our latent tension index corresponds with the state of Greek-Turkish affairs as reported by media outlets in both countries.

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As Table 1 indicates, there is a striking difference in how often Turkish media reported on Greece-Turkey relations, pointing to escalating tensions particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean. This shift also affects all three newspapers studied. Even though the right-wing conservative *Sabah* tends to report much more about Greek-Turkish relations than *Birgün* and *Cumhuriyet*, all three newspapers exhibit similar positions on Turkey's foreign affairs, especially in the context of Greece-Turkey relations, regardless of their political stance. Greece, on the one hand, is positively portrayed in the Turkish media only when news cover economic and military cooperation between the two countries. On the other hand, Greece mostly has a negative disposition in the Turkish media when news articles are about gas explorations in the Eastern Mediterranean, the conversion of Hagia Sophia to a mosque, the alleged mistreatment of the Turkish-speaking minority in Greece, and the Greek response to irregular crossings in the Aegean and at the Greek-Turkish land border.

While the newspapers report similar content and incidents, it is crucial to note that how news headlines are formulated varies across the three newspapers, especially when it comes to the *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland) doctrine, an ideological discourse in which Ankara emphasizes the use of naval supremacy to defend "Turkey's right to maritime boundaries, its ownership of hydrocarbon resources and the status of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is recognized only by Turkey" against challenges by Greece and Cyprus (Adar and Toygür 2020: 2).

To exemplify, *Sabah* tends to glorify Turkey and its actions in the Eastern Mediterranean through more populist headlines such as 'Continental shelf lesson for Greece' whilst *Birgün* and *Cumhuriyet* report similar news but use more descriptive headlines without necessarily overpraising Turkey, such as 'NAVTEX Battles between Greece and Turkey' and 'NAVTEX Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean'. In a slightly distinct manner, a similar pattern is also observed while reporting on irregular crossings in the Aegean. To illustrate, *Birgün*'s headlines are mostly about boat sinkings and rescuing asylum seekers while *Cumhuriyet*'s and *Sabah*'s headlines adopt a more accusive language emphasizing the 'inhumane treatment of asylum seekers by Greece' or that 'Greece leaves irregular migrants dead'. Referring again to Table 1, such more negative portrayals were very prevalent in the high-tension period of June-July 2020 but more muted when tensions were lower.

Reporting in the Greek media follows a very similar pattern. There, all three newspapers portray Turkey negatively in their frequent reports on gas explorations, irregular migration, or the Hagia Sophia while it receives positive reference only in the rare reports on economic or security cooperation. Here too, Greek-Turkish relations featured heavily in June-July 2020. For instance, *Efsyn* reported that military threats had become more prevalent and expressed worries that the activities of Oruç Reis may further escalate the dispute. *TaNea* identified Greek-Turkish relations as one of the four big challenges facing the Mitsotakis' government. And *Kathimerini* published a series of articles focusing on the Turkish-Libyan memorandum on maritime zones, Turkish airspace incursions, bilateral military build-ups, and the increased instability in the Eastern Mediterranean.

| Newspaper | Socio-political tension over socio-cultural symbols | | Economic and military cooperation | | De-escalation efforts | | Territorial tension | | Humanitarian Crisis | |
|--------------------|---|----------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|
| | May-June 2016 | June-July 2020 | May-June 2016 | June-July 2020 | May-June 2016 | June-July 2020 | May-June 2016 | June-July 2020 | May-June 2016 | June-July 2020 |
| <i>Sabah</i> | 1 | 37 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 7 | 7 | 43 | 6 | 29 |
| <i>BirGün</i> | 0 | 7 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 11 | 2 | 6 |
| <i>Cumhuriyet</i> | 1 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 14 | 6 | 2 |
| <i>Kathimerini</i> | 2 | 34 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 18 | 1 | 105 | 0 | 8 |
| <i>TaNea</i> | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Efsyn</i> | 1 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 2 | 51 | 0 | 0 |

Table 1: Media Reports on Bilateral Relations.

While the Greek news media thus discussed tensions between Ankara and Athens at great length in June-July 2020, this is not the case for May-June 2016. For this period, our search resulted in few items on political or socio-cultural tensions, with news on the then-planned conversion of Hagia Sophia being the exception, while *Kathimerini* instead reported on cooperation between the two countries. Taken together, this analysis suggests that Greek-Turkish tensions were significant in June-July 2020 but much more muted in May-June 2016, as indicated both by the number and the tone of news reports collected from three Turkish and three Greek newspapers. In other words, the perceptions of dispute intensity as exhibited in these news sources align closely to the measure of tension developed here.

Finally, we use the index to examine the relationship of bilateral tensions and trade activity between the two countries. Existing studies document a significant impact of airspace incursions on Athens stock market returns (Athanassiou et al. 2006). As such, we expect increasing tensions to deter bilateral trade activity due to rising uncertainty about the future and the threat of military escalation. To examine this relationship, we compare tension scores and trade volume (UN 2021) over the period January 2010 to December 2020 in Figure 2.

The Figure indicates that higher values of tension correspond to lower values of trade volume. In particular, the total value of trade increased between 2010 and 2014 when tensions were low. The gradual increase in tensions during 2015 corresponds to a substantial decrease in the trade volume in the same period.

Trade volume appears to have increased between 2017 and late 2019 despite tensions remaining comparatively high, albeit not to the 2010-2014 levels. However, this positive trend in bilateral trade stops in early 2020 and the sharp drop in trade observed throughout the rest of 2020 coincides with rising tensions. Figure 2 thus offers preliminary evidence that increasing tensions in Greek-Turkish affairs may decrease bilateral trade.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POLICY SUGGESTIONS

The August 2020 naval standoff made clear that the potential for a large-scale military escalation in the Greek-Turkish dispute remains present. In order to help facilitate resolution, we introduced a latent tension index based on publicly available, monthly data capturing airspace violations, naval incursions, arms imports, and exploratory talks.

The index serves as a neutral early-warning system for relevant stakeholders, thus facilitating trust-building and cooperation between the two sides by providing objective, up-to-date information on the state of play of bilateral relations.

We illustrate that the index captures increasing tension in the Greek-Turkish dispute since 2017, culminating in the 2020 standoff, and that it corresponds to the state of Greek-Turkish affairs as presented by the media in both countries. Finally, preliminary evidence indicates that increasing tension levels between Greece and Turkish may reduce bilateral economic activity. Building on these insights, we offer three actionable policy recommendations.

- **Continuing the latent tension index:** Persistent tension in Greek-Turkish relations indicates the need for a real-time, objective measure of dispute intensity to guard against re-escalation and support mediation between the two states. A coalition of Greek and Turkish civil society organizations, think tanks, and research centers is perfectly suited to publish and continuously update such a measure, building on the progress presented here.

- **Expanding publicly available data in both countries:** To realize the full potential of this tension measure for conflict resolution, it is imperative to expand the included data. Civil society or academics may collect data on omitted but important events such as military exercises, diplomatic protests or even disputes in the NATO forums. More pressingly, the measure lacks data capturing the Turkish perspective, pointing to the need for data documenting Greek incursions into Turkish-claimed waters and airspace.
- **Encouraging enhanced civil society cooperation:** The latent tension index, and the wider Dialogue framework, demonstrate how academics and civil society in Greece and Turkey can collaborate to provide much-needed, objective information on Greek-Turkish relations, thus serving an important role in despite resolution. Future initiatives can build on and enhance this fruitful cooperation to develop more amicable relations between the two neighbors.

Adding to these policy recommendations, this study presents many avenues for future research. The latent tension index can be significantly expanded upon with the inclusion of more fine-grained data both regarding its existing components but also new ones, like diplomatic protests. Similarly, systemic shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic may be included. The index can be used in multivariate time-series models to investigate different aspects of Greek-Turkish relations, extending the application to bilateral economic activity. Finally, the collection of data on Greek activities from the Turkish point of view would significantly increase the research's potential and offer more insight on the dispute. Civil society and academia can thus play a decisive role in conflict resolution by providing fact-based, neutral information on bilateral tension to stakeholders in both countries. Ultimately, we are fully aware that the Greek-Turkish dispute can only be resolved with clear delimitation and mutual compromises. As such, civil society can facilitate conflict resolution by providing stakeholders with the needed information to improve the prospects of effective mediation.

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APPENDICES

| Variable | Description | Unit of Obs. | Data Source |
|---------------------|--|--------------|--|
| Airspace Incursions | Count of aerial incursions, all types | Month | Hellenic National Defence General Staff (2021) |
| Naval Incursions | Count of naval incursions, all types | Month | Hellenic National Defence General Staff (2021) |
| Greek Arms Imports | Greek imports - Turkish imports in previous year, set to 0 if negative | Year | SIPRI (2021) |
| Exploratory Talks | Dummy | Month | Own coding |

Table A1: Components and data sources of the tension index.

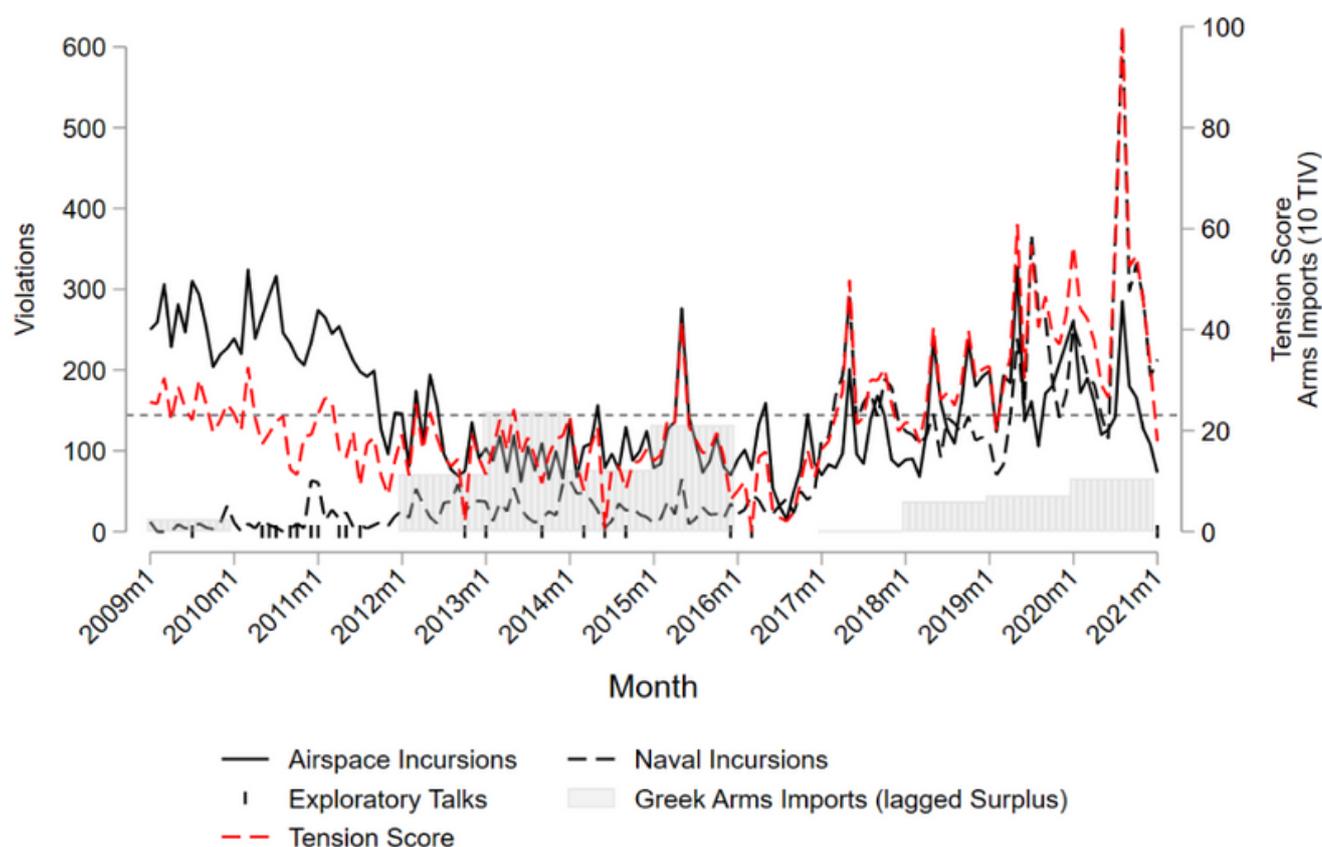


Figure A1: Greek-Turkish tension and its components, January 2009 – January 2021.

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Ioannis Choulis is a PhD candidate from the Department of Government at the University of Essex. His research focuses on issues of interstate conflict and aspects of civil-military relations, like conscription or coup d'état. You can find published samples of his work in journals such as *Defence and Peace Economics*, *International Interactions* and *Foreign Policy Analysis*.

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Selin Siviş defended her Doctoral thesis from the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex, in 2020. In her research, she focuses on how the boundary-making process takes place in multiple forms from perspectives of host population towards refugees and asylum-seekers in the informal market economy. She currently works as researcher for a British Academy funded project, titled "Wellbeing, Housing, and Infrastructure in Turkey," coordinated by the Institute of Development Studies. She also held visiting research fellow positions at the University of Konstanz, Germany, Yaşar University in İzmir and Çukurova University in Adana, Turkey. Her areas of interest include international migration, the informal labour market, local labour market integration policies, welfare deservingness, multiple forms of exclusion, and social and symbolic boundaries. She has published articles in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* and *International Migration*.

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