

Research Article

Strategic Recalibration and Hierarchy in the Aegean: A Power Transition Analysis of Regional Maritime Disputes

Ege'de Stratejik Yeniden Kalibrasyon ve Hiyerarşi: Bölgesel Deniz İhtilaflarının Güç Geçişi Analizi

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Abstract

This article reconceptualizes the Aegean maritime disputes as a structural contest over regional hierarchy rather than a purely technical problem of maritime delimitation. Drawing on Power Transition Theory and Multiple Hierarchy Model, it examines how the changing material balance of power between Türkiye and Greece reshapes legal interpretations of maritime jurisdiction within the Aegean regional subsystem. The study argues that competing legal positions are embedded in broader strategic objectives. While Greece relies on the normative framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to preserve the existing maritime order, Türkiye seeks a recalibration that reflects its expanding naval capabilities and regional influence. Employing a qualitative, theory-driven case study, the analysis seeks to mitigate the risk of ecological fallacy by disaggregating aggregate defense expenditures into naval-specific indicators. The findings suggest that the persistent deadlock may be understood not merely as a product of legal ambiguity or diplomatic failure, but also as a managed equilibrium associated with an ongoing process of regional power transition. By systematically applying the Multiple Hierarchy Model to the Aegean and operationalizing power transition through maritime-specific capability indicators, the study offers a novel framework for explaining the interaction between legal norms, material capabilities, and regional stability in semi-enclosed seas.

Keywords: Aegean Sea, UNCLOS, Power Transition Theory, Maritime Security, Multiple Hierarchy Model

Öz

Bu makale, Ege Denizi'ndeki deniz yetki alanları uyumsuzluklarını yalnızca teknik bir deniz sınırlandırma sorunu olarak değil, bölgesel hiyerarşiye ilişkin yapısal bir mücadele olarak yeniden kavramsallaştırmaktadır. Güç Geçişi Teorisi ve Çoklu Hiyerarşi Modeli çerçevesinde çalışma, Türkiye ile Yunanistan arasındaki değişen maddi güç dengesinin Ege bölgesel alt sistemindeki deniz yetki alanlarına ilişkin hukuki yorumları nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiğini incelemektedir. Çalışma, tarafların hukuki pozisyonlarının daha geniş stratejik hedeflere dayandığını ileri sürmektedir. Yunanistan mevcut deniz düzenini korumak amacıyla Birleşmiş Milletler Deniz Hukuku Sözleşmesi'nin (BMDHS/UNCLOS) normatif çerçevesine dayanırken, Türkiye artan deniz gücü kapasitesi ve bölgesel etkisini yansıtacak bir yeniden kalibrasyon arayışındadır. Nitel ve teori temelli bir örnek olay tasarımı benimseyen analiz, ekolojik yanılgıyı önlemek amacıyla toplam savunma harcamalarını deniz kuvvetlerine özgü göstergelere ayırmaktadır. Bulgular, Ege'deki süregelen çıkmazın hukuki belirsizlik veya

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diplomatik başarısızlıktan ziyade, devam eden bölgesel güç geçişi sürecinin sürdürdüğü yönetilen bir dengeyi yansıttığını göstermektedir. Çoklu Hiyerarşi Modeli'nin Ege örneğine sistematik biçimde uygulanması ve güç geçişinin deniz gücüne özgü kapasite göstergeleri üzerinden operasyonelleştirilmesiyle çalışma, hukuki normlar, maddi kapasite ve bölgesel istikrar arasındaki etkileşimi açıklayan özgün bir analitik çerçeve sunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Ege Denizi, BMDHS (UNCLOS), Güç Geçişi Teorisi, Deniz Güvenliği, Çoklu Hiyerarşi Modeli

1. INTRODUCTION

The Aegean Sea functions as a critical regional subsystem where maritime claims serve as instruments within a broader process of regional power transition. While conventional literature often focuses on the complexities of technical maritime delimitation, this study reinterprets the conflict through the lens of Power Transition Theory (PTT). Within this framework, the persistent deadlock is not merely a product of legal ambiguity. Instead, it emerges from the systemic interplay between the established regional order and a shifting distribution of material capabilities. Drawing on Douglas Lemke's Multiple Hierarchy Model, this study posits that the Aegean represents a local hierarchy characterized by a structural misalignment between the maritime status quo and the evolving regional agency of the actors involved.

In this context, maritime security is not reducible to naval rivalry. It is a multidimensional struggle where jurisdictional claims are instrumentalized to define hierarchical positioning. Greece, strategically aligned with the preservation of the established maritime status quo, utilizes the normative framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) for positional maintenance. Conversely, Türkiye seeks a realignment of the maritime regime to reflect its increasing naval projection and regional influence, perceiving certain interpretations of international maritime rules as geographical constraints on its strategic depth.

Within this structural process, the capability-status gap between the two actors operates as the central driver of contestation. As Türkiye's material capabilities approach parity with Greece's established position, jurisdictional entitlements are treated by both sides as core parameters of the regional hierarchy rather than as routine matters of legal interpretation. This dynamic increases the political costs of compromise and converts legal disagreements into a rigid bargaining environment. Ultimately, this research argues that the ongoing deadlock serves a functional purpose in managing the shift in regional power dynamics, maintaining a strategic equilibrium while the parties navigate this period of transition.

In recent years, the Aegean has also exhibited periods of tactical de-escalation and renewed diplomatic contact. These episodes, however, have not translated into structural settlement. Rather, they are consistent with the article's core claim: under conditions of hierarchy recalibration, actors may temporarily suppress escalation while keeping the legal and operational core issues unresolved. In this sense, short-term stabilization should be understood as "managed rivalry" that preserves bargaining positions during transition, not as evidence that the underlying hierarchy contest has ended.

To bridge this analytical gap, this study addresses the following central research question: How does the shifting material balance of power between Türkiye and Greece reshape the normative and legal interpretations of maritime jurisdiction in the semi-enclosed subsystem of the Aegean Sea?

To substantiate this power transition perspective, the article proceeds in three stages. First, it operationalizes the concepts of positional maintenance and normative contestation by analyzing how Türkiye and Greece utilize international legal frameworks as strategic assets within the regional hierarchy. Second, it examines how jurisdictional claims over the breadth of territorial waters and the status of islands function as a mechanism that stabilizes the regional deadlock by reducing diplomatic flexibility as the parties approach power parity.

Finally, the study provides a comprehensive empirical evaluation of the power transition through disaggregated material indicators. To avoid the analytical pitfalls of an ecological fallacy, the research moves beyond aggregate macroeconomic defense expenditures to evaluate localized, service-specific naval personnel metrics, the impact of indigenous defense localization rates (reaching 80% as of 2024), and the qualitative transformation of subsystem-specific naval assets such as the TCG Anadolu (L-400). By examining how localized material parity shifts translate into a durable, controlled deadlock, this

study alters the focus from the rigid text of the law to the strategic utility of legal interpretation in managing power, thereby contributing to a more realistic understanding of maritime security in semi-enclosed seas.

2. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven case study design, treating the Aegean as a single, bounded maritime subsystem within which Power Transition Theory (Organski, 1958) and Lemke's (2002) Multiple Hierarchy Model are applied through structured, focused comparison. The unit of analysis is the bilateral Türkiye- Greece maritime hierarchy, examined across three registers: (i) the normative-legal register, comprising primary legal instruments (UNCLOS, the Lausanne and Paris treaties) and ICJ jurisprudence; (ii) the material-capability register, comprising official defense-economic data; and (iii) the doctrinal register, comprising official strategy and policy documents. Consistent with a rational-material operationalization of PTT, the analysis treats legal claims, budgets, and procurement decisions themselves as observable behavioral indicators of positional maintenance or challenge. This scope condition is made explicit to avoid conflating this rational-material design with securitization-theoretic frameworks that would require a different evidentiary base.

Empirical material is drawn from official and institutional sources -SIPRI, the Turkish Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB), the Hellenic Ministry of National Defence, and the IISS Military Balance-triangulated with primary legal texts. Rather than treating secondary sources as a substitute for original analysis, the study's contribution lies in the disaggregation strategy itself. Aggregate national defense figures are deliberately decomposed into naval-specific indicators (service-specific personnel, indigenous naval procurement, localization rates) to isolate the Aegean maritime subsystem from Türkiye's broader defense posture across multiple operational fronts. These indicators are then interpreted through the Multiple Hierarchy Model, a linkage not previously applied systematically to the Aegean case. This disaggregated, theory-guided analysis of published material indicators, rather than the collection of new primary data, constitutes the study's principal methodological and analytical contribution.

This study utilizes PTT proposed by A.F.K. Organski (1958) as its primary analytical lens to move beyond the narrow confines of traditional maritime security studies. Legal and jurisdictional contestation in the Aegean is not merely a matter of treaty interpretation but represents a strategic instrument used to manage a regional hierarchy struggle (Bueger and Edmunds, 2017, p. 1295). Within this framework, legal claims serve to transform jurisdictional entitlements into tools of either positional maintenance or structural challenge (Bueger and Edmunds, 2017, p. 1298).

By framing technical rules as vital to national survival, the parties shift the dispute from routine bargaining to a struggle over the regional order (Iheduru, 2023, p. 7). Disagreements over the UNCLOS and customary law are thus transformed into strategic parameters that determine the distribution of power (Emmers, 2013, pp. 10-11). The transition of the Aegean from a technical delimitation puzzle to a structural deadlock reflects the systemic interplay between a status quo power and a rising challenger (Tammen, 2000, p. 18).

Crucially, while maritime security studies occasionally evaluate legal frameworks through post-structural or discursive lenses, this study intentionally operationalizes legal contestation as a function of rational-material distribution. The capability-status gap does not eliminate the relevance of law, but it restructures the political meaning of legal interpretation to serve hierarchical goals (Bueger, 2015, p. 11). As maritime claims are embedded into national defense architectures, they function as mechanisms of normative contestation rather than purely discursive security practices (Bueger, 2015, p. 14). This process reduces the interpretative flexibility of international norms and makes compromise appear as a strategic concession in the face of a shifting power balance. The resulting deadlock is a functional state that sustains a strategic equilibrium while the actors negotiate their relative positions within the regional hierarchy (Bölükbaşı, 2004, p. 40).

To situate the Aegean more precisely within PTT, this study also adopts Douglas Lemke's extension of the framework to the regional level through the Multiple Hierarchy Model. In this view, the international system is composed of multiple local hierarchies whose dynamics can generate conflict independently of systemic transitions (Lemke, 2002, p. 48). Each local hierarchy features a dominant power that is

comparatively satisfied with the regional status quo and seeks to preserve it, alongside other actors whose alignment varies across layers (Lemke, 2002, p. 52).

Crucially, Lemke argues that when a challenger approaching power parity with the local dominant seeks a recalibration, the likelihood of systemic adjustment rises within that local hierarchy (Lemke, 2002, p. 55). Viewed from this perspective, the Aegean deadlock results from a local hierarchical interplay. Within this dynamic, shifting capabilities and structural misalignments are managed through legal and security practices rather than resolved through technical delimitation (Lemke, 2002, p. 72). Accordingly, the Aegean should be viewed not only as a legal disagreement but as a local hierarchy in which approaching parity intensifies strategic bargaining and makes deadlock a functional equilibrium.

The application of PTT to the Aegean context must also account for the multifaceted role of strategic culture in regional dynamics. As observed in other geopolitical settings, a power transition does not always lead to immediate direct rivalry if the rising power finds strategic utility in the existing order or if regional hierarchies are mediated by the agency of local actors (Zhao, 2025, p. 1). In the Aegean, the deadlock itself functions as a stabilizing mechanism where both the status quo power and the challenger utilize legal frameworks to manage the uncertainties of transition (Zhao, 2025, p. 3). This suggests that the explanatory power of PTT is enhanced when it incorporates not only the material parity between states but also the specific strategic context at the dyadic level (Zhao, 2025, p. 4). By framing jurisdictional claims as existential security matters, the parties create a structural legal deadlock. While this prevents a final resolution, it also serves to avoid a decisive military confrontation.

3. THE NORMATIVE ARCHITECTURE: STATUS QUO NORMS AND REVISIONIST EQUITY

This section establishes that the core of the Aegean deadlock is a systemic interplay between status quo zone entitlement rules and equity-based delimitation practices. The semi-enclosed character and dense island geography of the Aegean intensify this strategic divergence. In this environment, technical legal choices regarding baseline configuration or the weight of islands produce disproportionate strategic effects.

The result is a normative architecture conducive to deadlock. Each side argues for the legality of its position while perceiving the strategic posture of the other as a move toward destabilization. Maritime jurisdiction results from the exclusive sovereignty of a coastal state over its land territory. This principle is captured by the legal maxim that *the land dominates the sea* (Purcell, 2019, p. 12).

This relationship highlights the central role of geography in the law of the sea. It underscores how maritime space is fundamentally embedded into national defense architectures and regional security calculations (Yiallourides, 2019, p. 5).

The legal boundaries of the oceans and airspace represent the foundational spatial order that the status quo power seeks to preserve. Under the UNCLOS, coastal states exercise varying degrees of authority, ranging from full sovereignty in the territorial sea and internal waters to functional jurisdiction in the contiguous zone and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (UNCLOS, 1982: Articles 33, 56, 77).

The strategic divergence arises from Greece's entitlement-based interpretation of Article 3, which grants a territorial sea of up to 12 nautical miles, versus the equity-based customary counter-argument of Türkiye regarding Articles 15 and relevant principles of customary international law (UNCLOS, 1982: Articles 3, 15). The continental shelf, comprising the seabed and subsoil, represents the natural prolongation of land territory to the outer edge of the continental margin (UNCLOS, 1982: Article 76). For states with opposite coasts, the delimitation of these zones must be affected by agreement to achieve an equitable solution (UNCLOS, 1982: Articles 74, 83).

Article 121 clarifies that islands are entitled to their own maritime zones. However, rocks that cannot sustain human habitation or economic life possess no EEZ or continental shelf (UNCLOS, 1982: Article 121). This provision is particularly relevant in the Aegean, where numerous features close to the Anatolian mainland play a crucial role in the contestation of maritime claims (Bölükbaşı, 2004, pp. 237-241). These rules are generally regarded as codifying customary international law, yet their application remains a site of intense strategic competition (Ioannides, 2020, pp. 5-7).

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) rejected the view that equidistance constitutes a mandatory rule of customary law, instead emphasizing equitable principles (ICJ, 1970, p. 3). Subsequent judicial evolution, seen in cases such as *Nicaragua v. Colombia*, underscores the willingness of courts to significantly reduce the maritime effect of islands. This is particularly evident when such features cut off the natural projection of a mainland coast (ICJ, 2022). In the Aegean, the dense concentration of islands raises questions about whether these features should generate full zones or be given reduced effect to achieve an equitable result (Başeren, 2006, pp. 100-110). This geographical configuration reinforces the tension between status quo entitlement logic and equity-based practice, making a structural legal deadlock more likely (Bueger and Edmunds, 2017, p. 1301). This deadlock is not merely a failure of legal interpretation, but a manifestation of a deeper structural contest over the regional hierarchy, where the law serves as the front line of strategic confrontation.

4. JURISDICTIONAL CLAIMS AS HIERARCHY CONTESTATION: TERRITORIAL WATERS AND THE TWELVE-MILE CATALYST

The maritime interactions between Türkiye and Greece represent a structural manifestation of a regional hierarchy struggle that escalated following the systemic shocks of the mid-twentieth century (Toppare, 2006, p. 13). The unique political geography of the Aegean Sea serves as the primary stage for this power transition process. The dense concentration of islands close to the Anatolian mainland prevents the strict application of universal maritime rules, necessitating a specialized regime based on regional power dynamics. While Greece suggests that the continental shelf remains the primary unresolved issue, Türkiye argues that the dispute covers a multidimensional spectrum including territorial waters and the status of islands.

4.1. The Territorial Sea: Navigational Freedom versus Geographical Constriction

The territorial waters dispute acts as a catalyst for strategic recalibration during this power transition. Originally fixed at three nautical miles by the Lausanne Peace Treaty of 1923, both states unilaterally extended their limits to six nautical miles as their regional capabilities evolved.

The potential extension of Greek territorial waters to twelve nautical miles is regarded by Türkiye as a significant geographical constriction. From Türkiye's perspective, this would not be a routine legal adjustment but a move that would transform the Aegean into a restricted maritime space (Bölükbaşı, 2004, p. 240). Greece, by contrast, regards such an extension as the exercise of a right available to any UNCLOS state party under Article 3. Türkiye has nonetheless officially framed such an extension as a *casus belli* to prevent a permanent hierarchical disadvantage within the local power structure.

Table 1: Distribution of Maritime Areas in the Aegean Sea

Zone	Current (6nm)	Potential (12nm)	Change
Turkish Territorial Waters	7.47%	8.76%	+1.29%
Greek Territorial Waters	38.66%	60.33%	+21.67%
Features not transferred	5.37%	10.65%	+5.28%
High Seas	48.85%	19.71%	-29.14%

Source: Başeren, 2006, pp. 108-109. **Note:** Percentages are based on area figures calculated independently in the original source and may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.

The spatial reordering depicted in Table 1 illustrates the structural nature of this transition. An extension to twelve nautical miles would increase Greek territorial waters to sixty percent of the Aegean while reducing the high seas from forty-nine percent to less than twenty percent (Başeren, 2006, p. 108). This change would effectively restrict the maritime projection of the Anatolian coastline and limit access to international waters for navigation and defense.

This dynamic illustrates how integrating maritime claims into security doctrines tends to constrain the interpretative flexibility of legal arguments, aligning them more closely with core national security priorities.

The situation is further complicated by the divergence between airspace and territorial water limits. Greece applies ten nautical miles of airspace for aviation purposes while maintaining six nautical miles of territorial waters at sea (Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Türkiye considers this

dual practice inconsistent with international law, as airspace is inherently connected to the maritime area under sovereignty according to the Chicago Convention (Convention on International Civil Aviation, 1944: Articles 1-2).

Furthermore, the designation of Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) zones constitutes another source of tension. Greece bases its SAR jurisdiction on the Flight Information Region (FIR) line, while Türkiye argues that this approach should be based on cooperation and coordination rather than unilateral regulations (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d; Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.)

4.2. Continental Shelf and Competing Hierarchical Doctrines

The core of the continental shelf dispute is rooted in a normative contest between two competing visions of regional order. This struggle involves Greece's reliance on the formal equality of the equidistance principle versus Türkiye's insistence on the substantive equity of natural prolongation. For Türkiye, the doctrine of natural prolongation is inextricably linked to its security architecture, designed to prevent the geographical constriction of the mainland. This contest embodies the fundamental disagreement between granting full effect to islands and maintaining a territorial balance compatible with regional security (Doğru, 2003, p. 224).

Türkiye argues that the Aegean is a semi-enclosed sea where the balance established by the Lausanne Peace Treaty must be preserved (Başeren, 2011, p. 151). Its core position is that islands located on the natural prolongation of the Anatolian mainland should not generate their own continental shelf (Belen, 1995, p. 166). This argument is supported by the ICJ, which established that equidistance is not a mandatory rule of customary international law (ICJ, 1970, p. 3).

Conversely, Greece treats its islands as integral parts of the mainland to project its jurisdictional hierarchy across the entire seabed. This deadlock is not a technical disagreement over methods but rather, it is a manifestation of a deeper struggle regarding which geographical units should define the regional strategic equilibrium (Papastavridis, 2020, p. 5). As the regional power balance continues to shift, these legal doctrines function as tools of strategic competition (Churchill and Lowe, 2022, p. 142).

4.3. Material Indicators of Regional Parity: Empirical Evidence for Power Transition

In PTT terms, the critical empirical question is whether relative capabilities are converging in the local hierarchy and whether the challenger's dissatisfaction is sufficiently salient to necessitate a recalibration. According to the Multiple Hierarchy Model, the likelihood of a structural deadlock increases as a regional actor seeking recalibration approaches power parity with the local dominant power (Lemke, 2002, p. 102). Empirical data from the last decade, particularly reflected in the 2024-2025 fiscal period, is consistent with this transition, illustrating how Türkiye's growing regional capacity exerts structural pressure on the existing Aegean hierarchy.

Global power metrics indicate a narrowing gap in national capacity that complicates the maintenance of the previous strategic equilibrium. While Greece remains focused on its regional maritime posture to preserve the status quo, Türkiye's national capacity has expanded across broader global indices. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) 2024 data, Türkiye's annual defense expenditure has reached approximately \$25.8 billion, nearly triple the \$8.01 billion allocated by Greece (SIPRI, 2025). This fiscal divergence allows the challenger to expand its short-term operational capacity, particularly by investing in asymmetric and force-multiplying technologies that directly challenge the positional maintenance strategies of the status quo power. In the near term, higher absolute spending translates into enhanced readiness, procurement flexibility, and the ability to sustain a more active maritime posture in contested spaces.

A single fiscal year, however, cannot on its own substantiate a claim of structural power transition, which by definition denotes a sustained convergence rather than a short-term fluctuation. A longitudinal perspective, drawn from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, lends firmer support to this claim across the 2015-2025 period: in constant (2024) US dollars, Türkiye's defense expenditure rose from approximately \$11.8 billion to \$26.8 billion, an increase of 128 percent in real terms, with the sharpest acceleration occurring after 2022 (SIPRI, 2026). Greece's expenditure over the same period expanded far more modestly, from roughly \$5.5 billion to \$7.8 billion, an increase of 41 percent, and followed a

markedly more volatile path, spiking to a decade high of \$9.6 billion in 2022 amid heightened tension in the Eastern Mediterranean before receding by close to a quarter over the following two years (SIPRI, 2026). This contrast between a steadily compounding Turkish trajectory and a Greek pattern of spike-and-retrenchment is consistent with the study's core claim: Türkiye's expanding capability reflects a sustained structural repositioning rather than a short-lived response to threat perception, whereas Greece's spending more closely tracks episodic security concerns.

The GDP-share data nonetheless complicate any straightforward narrative of narrowing. Greece's defense burden has remained consistently above Türkiye's throughout the decade, rising from 2.5 percent of GDP in 2015 to a peak of 4.0 percent in 2022 before easing to roughly 3.0 percent in 2025, whereas Türkiye's burden has fluctuated within a narrower band of 1.8 to 2.6 percent and stood at 1.9 percent in 2025 (SIPRI, 2026). Considered against the Multiple Hierarchy Model, this suggests that Türkiye's growing material capacity has been enabled less by a rising fiscal commitment to defense than by the faster expansion of its underlying economic base. This distinction refines rather than undermines the power transition argument advanced in this study. It is precisely this compounding economic growth, rather than proportional strain on national income, that sustains the durability of Türkiye's structural trajectory and, by extension, the capability-status gap that this study identifies as the central driver of the Aegean deadlock. To address this limitation and illustrate potential structural convergence more clearly, Table 2 below reports subsystem-specific naval parameters. Shifting from macro-level national spending, the Turkish Navy fields approximately 45,000 personnel against the Hellenic Navy's approximately 33,000 active personnel (IISS, 2025), presenting a capability ratio that is significantly narrower and more structurally balanced than the overall aggregate budget divergence suggests. The remaining indicators in Table 2, namely the industry localization rate and the indigenous naval procurement programs, are maritime-specific by construction, since they refer directly to naval platforms (MİLGEM corvettes, Reis-class submarines, the TCG Anadolu) rather than to the land or air domains. The qualitative case that follows is built primarily on these maritime-specific indicators, while the aggregate budget and GDP-ratio figures are retained only as a broader contextual indicator of national capacity rather than as direct evidence of naval-specific parity.

Table 2: Comparative Strategic Indicators (2024-2025)

Indicator	Türkiye (TR)	Greece (GR)	Data Source
Annual Defense Budget	~\$25.8 Billion	~\$8.01 Billion	SIPRI (2025)
Defense Spending / GDP	1.8%	3.7%	SIPRI / HMOD
Industry Localization Rate	80%	Low (Import Dependent)	SSB (2025) / SIPRI
Strategic Procurement	Indigenous (UCAV, MİLGEM)	External (Rafale, FDI, F-35)	SSB / HMOD
Naval Personnel (Service-Specific)	~45,000	~33,000	IISS Military Balance (2025)

The qualitative transformation of naval and aerial assets further fuels the strategic recalibration of the Aegean. Crucially, the empirical validity of this shift does not rely on abstract macroeconomic scaling, but on the deployment of subsystem-specific naval platforms explicitly designed for sub-systemic maritime denial and projection. According to the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB) 2024 Activity Report, the deployment of the TCG Anadolu and its integration with indigenous Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs), specifically the Bayraktar TB3, is presented by Turkish authorities as a significant step toward greater self-sufficiency in naval power projection. This platform, alongside the induction of the national MİLGEM corvettes and the Reis-class Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP) submarines, is intended to reduce Türkiye's reliance on external supply for enforcing its maritime doctrines in semi-enclosed spaces, mirroring in a different form the capability-building strategy that Greece pursues through off-the-shelf procurement. From the perspective of the challenger, this reduces the degree to which existing legal arrangements alone can be relied upon to preserve the status quo.

Beyond conventional platforms, the diffusion of uncrewed and autonomous capabilities is increasingly relevant for maritime power projection in the island-dense Aegean setting. Unmanned aerial systems, network-enabled ISR, and the integration of these assets into naval task groups amplify presence while reducing operational risk. For a power-transition view, these developments matter because they widen the spectrum of signaling and enforcement options below the threshold of open confrontation, thereby reinforcing the durability of a controlled deadlock.

By comparison, Greece has pursued naval and air modernization primarily through the acquisition of FDI-class frigates and Rafale jets, leveraging mature Western defense-industrial platforms rather than indigenous production (HMOD, 2024). Greece's domestic defense-industrial base contributes about 0.6 percent of GDP, a share it has sought to expand in recent years through EU-level capability instruments (Blavoukos and Lamprou, 2026). The Rafale acquisition illustrates the scale of this modernization effort: an initial January 2021 contract for 18 F3R aircraft was followed by a March 2022 order for six more, bringing the fleet to 24 (Dassault Aviation, 2022), at a combined cost of approximately €3.6 billion (Reuters, 2022). The Belharra-class (FDI) frigates follow a similar pattern. Ordered from Naval Group in March 2022 and equipped with the Thales Sea Fire multifunction radar, the lead ship HS Kimon was delivered in December 2025, with two further hulls scheduled for 2026 and a fourth, ordered in November 2025, expected by 2028-2029 (Naval Technology, 2026). Because these platforms are procured off-the-shelf from mature Western defense-industrial bases, Greece is able to compress its acquisition timeline, whereas Türkiye's indigenous programs, such as MİLGEM or the Reis-class submarines, follow a longer, incremental development path in exchange for reduced dependence on external suppliers. Consequently, the two states are narrowing the capability-status gap along different axes. Türkiye's indigenous procurement compresses the personnel and localization dimensions, while Greece's off-the-shelf procurement compresses the platform-sophistication dimension. This suggests that the overall trajectory of naval convergence in the Aegean subsystem is more contested, and less unidirectional, than an analysis confined to localization rates alone would imply. This material divergence helps explain why legal disagreements over maritime limits tend to be translated into a structural struggle over the future of the Aegean order.

5. STRATEGIC INTERPLAY IN PRACTICE: OPERATIONAL DEADLOCK

Beyond questions of formal delimitation, the normative tensions in the Aegean shape a set of non-delimitation disputes that directly impact regional hierarchy. Issues relating to fisheries, the status of islets and rocks, and the militarization of the Eastern Aegean islands illustrate how the absence of agreed maritime boundaries interacts with competing legal narratives to produce recurring crises.

5.1. Fisheries Disputes and the Absence of an EEZ

The sharing of living resources represents a critical yet often overlooked dimension of the Aegean hierarchy struggle. Türkiye and Greece face persistent challenges in fisheries due to the lack of an EEZ agreement. Beyond distributional questions over access and catch, these disputes become embedded in the broader hierarchy contest. As observed in other maritime complexes, illegal or unregulated fishing is increasingly treated as a matter of national strategic concern, which shifts the issue from routine regulatory governance toward the domain of national defense posture (Beseng and Malcolm, 2021, p. 517). In the Aegean, the fisheries question is similarly absorbed into the broader structural legal deadlock.

According to UNCLOS, the regions outside territorial waters are defined as high seas where the freedom of fishing is a fundamental right (UNCLOS, 1982: Article 87). Under the 1982 Convention, the coastal state has sovereignty over fishing in its territorial waters and its EEZ but must promote the optimum utilization of living resources (UNCLOS, 1982: Articles 61-62). However, the potential extension of Greek territorial waters to twelve nautical miles would disproportionately change the balance of interests to the detriment of Türkiye. Consequently, the absence of an EEZ agreement is not merely a regulatory gap but rather a contested space within the regional hierarchy where resource access and strategic competition become mutually reinforcing (Bueger and Edmunds, 2017, p. 1300).

5.2. The Demilitarization of Islands as a Strategic Linchpin

The most acute manifestation of the power transition process in the Aegean is the dispute over the demilitarization of the Eastern Aegean islands. The Lausanne Peace Treaty of 1923 confirms Greek sovereignty over islands such as Mytilene and Chios but explicitly subjects this sovereignty to military restrictions. Article 13 placed these features in a disarmed status to preserve the regional strategic equilibrium (Lausanne Peace Treaty, 1923: Article 12-13). The 1947 Paris Treaty further confirmed this demilitarized status as a condition for regional peace and security.

The demilitarization of these islands represents the normative linchpin of the Lausanne balance, and its erosion indicates a physical shift in the regional hierarchy (Stivachtis, 1999, p. 104). Greece interprets these treaties differently by claiming that contemporary security needs allow for the militarization of these features (Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). From the perspective of PTT, the militarization of these islands is perceived not merely as a treaty violation, but as a direct alteration of the regional power balance.

This dispute transforms a textual disagreement over treaty provisions into a broader contest over the regional hierarchy (Lausanne Peace Treaty, 1923: Articles 12-13). Each legal interpretation is inseparable from a security posture where the legal argument functions as a security claim.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A STRATEGIC GRAND BARGAIN IN THE AEGEAN

The Aegean Sea represents a critical hierarchy struggle involving aerial navigation, military security, and economic survival. This study has argued that the instability in the region is rooted in a structural legal deadlock where normative disagreements are inseparable from strategic imperatives. In response to the central research question posed by this study, the empirical and theoretical findings support the view that the shifting material balance of power between the two actors actively reshapes the maritime subsystem, transforming technical legal disputes into primary tools of hierarchy contestation. Consequently, as relative capabilities converge, international legal frameworks cease to function as neutral regulatory tools and are instead instrumentalized either for positional maintenance or structural recalibration. The analysis suggests that the tension between status quo legal norms and equity-based claims creates a normative architecture conducive to deadlock. While Greece utilizes the principle of equidistance for positional maintenance, Türkiye emphasizes natural prolongation to seek a regional recalibration. Rather than resolving this systemic interplay, the parties tend to frame their legal narratives in ways that complicate potential compromise and deepen strategic divergence.

The findings are consistent with the claim that the potential extension of territorial waters to twelve nautical miles functions as a primary catalyst for strategic contestation during this power transition. For Türkiye, this legal entitlement is interpreted as a geographical constriction that would effectively surround its coastline with restricted waters. This perception converts a technical legal question into a vital security parameter, which reduces interpretive flexibility and reinforces the regional security dilemma. Furthermore, the disputes over fisheries and the demilitarization of islands illustrate how legal rules are utilized as strategic instruments of normative contestation. The absence of an agreed maritime boundary is not a regulatory gap but a structural space where resource access and treaty interpretation are used to manage the regional balance of power between two North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies.

In conclusion, a narrow approach focused solely on technical boundary demarcation is insufficient to achieve a sustainable solution. The parties must move beyond the current deadlock by negotiating a flexible framework that reflects the actual distribution of power in the Aegean. Drawing on UNCLOS Article 123 regarding cooperation in semi-enclosed seas, a strategic grand bargain involving joint management of resources and maritime traffic could mitigate the normative conflict. The Aegean case supports the call for security studies to treat the maritime arena as a site where legal rules and the regional power hierarchy co-produce international order. By lowering the political stakes attached to legal claims in favor of functional cooperation, the coastal states can transition from a rigid deadlock toward a more stable regional hierarchy based on mutual strategic interests (Bueger and Edmunds, 2017, p. 1311).

A key implication is that functional cooperation can be expanded even in the absence of final delimitation. The logic of semi-enclosed seas, as reflected in UNCLOS Article 123, provides a

pragmatic rationale for issue-specific arrangements such as maritime traffic safety, fisheries coordination, or incident-prevention mechanisms that reduce the costs of hierarchy-driven bargaining. Such arrangements do not resolve the hierarchy contest, but they can lower escalation risks while preserving each side's core legal positions. This explains why managed cooperation remains compatible with a transition-era equilibrium.

The persistence of the Aegean deadlock also highlights the increasing strategic autonomy of regional actors in navigating great power rivalries. As observed in other maritime and geopolitical contexts, regional powers are no longer mere playing fields for external hegemonies but active agents that shape the direction of external engagement to maximize their own interests (Zhao, 2025, pp. 5-6). In the Aegean, both Türkiye and Greece utilize their positions within larger institutional frameworks, such as NATO and the European Union, as strategic leverage to consolidate their respective hierarchical claims. This multipolar regional structure dilutes the direct impact of global power transitions and provides local actors with unprecedented room for maneuver. In this context, the Aegean has become a key arena where regional agency mediates the effects of international legal norms. Consequently, any sustainable resolution must recognize that the primary contest is not simply a binary legal disagreement but a multifaceted process involving the assertion of local agency and the recalibration of regional influence (Zhao, 2025, p. 7). A sustainable framework for the Aegean must therefore move beyond bilateral legal posturing toward a multilateral architecture that acknowledges both the positional interests of the parties and the functional realities of a shared maritime space (Zhao, 2025, p. 7; Bueger and Edmunds, 2017, p. 1311).

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Araştırma Makalesi

Strategic Recalibration and Hierarchy in the Aegean: A Power Transition Analysis of Regional Maritime Disputes

*Ege’de Stratejik Yeniden Kalibrasyon ve Hiyerarşi: Bölgesel Deniz İhtilaflarının Güç
Geçişi Analizi*

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Genişletilmiş Özet

Ege Denizi, kıyıdaş devletler arasında yalnızca deniz hukukuna ilişkin teknik uyumsuzlukların yaşandığı bir coğrafi alan değil, aynı zamanda bölgesel ve küresel güç geçişlerinin somutlaştığı stratejik bir alt sistem niteliği taşımaktadır. Uluslararası ilişkiler ve uluslararası hukuk literatüründe Ege ihtilafları çoğunlukla karasularının genişliği, kıta sahanlığı ve deniz yetki alanlarının sınırlandırılması gibi hukuki ve teknik meseleler üzerinden ele alınmaktadır. Bu çalışma ise söz konusu ihtilafları, A. F. K. Organski’nin Güç Geçişi Teorisi ile Douglas Lemke’nin Çoklu Hiyerarşi Modeli çerçevesinde yeniden değerlendirmektedir. Bu teorik yaklaşım doğrultusunda Ege’de süregelen statüko ve çözümsüzlük, hukuki belirsizliklerden ziyade bölgesel güç dağılımındaki yapısal dönüşüm ile mevcut normatif düzen arasındaki uyumsuzluğun bir yansıması olarak ele alınmaktadır.

Bu kapsamda Ege Denizi, kendi dinamiklerine sahip bölgesel bir hiyerarşiyi temsil eden yerel bir alt sistem olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Taraflar, hukuki argümanlarını ve deniz yetki alanlarına ilişkin iddialarını yalnızca normatif gerekçeler doğrultusunda değil, aynı zamanda mevcut yapısal konumlarını korumak ya da yeniden tanımlamak amacıyla stratejik araçlar olarak kullanmaktadır. Yunanistan, Birleşmiş Milletler Deniz Hukuku Sözleşmesi’nin (BMDHS) sağladığı hak temelli normatif çerçeveye dayanarak mevcut bölgesel deniz düzenini muhafaza etmeye çalışırken, Türkiye son yıllarda artan deniz gücü kapasitesi, yerli savunma sanayii kapasitesi ve genişleyen bölgesel nüfuzunun mevcut statükoya yansıtılmasını amaçlayan yapısal bir değişim talebini dile getirmektedir. Türkiye, uluslararası deniz hukukunun mevcut hükümlerinin Ege’nin özgün coğrafi koşullarını dikkate almayan katı yorumlarının, kendi jeostratejik derinliğini ve anakara kaynaklı deniz kapasitesini sınırlandırdığını savunmaktadır.

Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, Türkiye ile Yunanistan arasındaki maddi güç dengesindeki değişimin, Ege Denizi gibi yarı kapalı bir deniz alt sisteminde egemenlik iddiaları, deniz yetki alanları ve bunlara ilişkin hukuki yorumlar üzerindeki etkisini ortaya koymaktır. Araştırma, iki ülke arasındaki “kapasite-statü makası” daraldıkça, teknik olarak çözülebilecek hukuki uyumsuzlukların nasıl giderek varoluşsal güvenlik meselelerine dönüştüğünü analiz etmektedir. Çalışmanın özgün katkısı ise yalnızca makro düzeydeki savunma harcamalarını esas almak yerine, Ege alt sistemine özgü askeri kapasiteyi deniz kuvvetleri personeli, platform bazlı kabiliyetler ve savunma sanayiindeki yerlilik oranları üzerinden ayrıştırılmış verilerle incelemesi ve Lemke’nin bölgesel hiyerarşi modelini Ege örneğine sistematik biçimde uygulamasıdır.

Araştırma, Ege Denizi’ni sınırları belirli bağımsız bir alt sistem olarak ele alan nitel ve teori temelli bir örnek olay tasarımıyla dayanmaktadır. Analiz, rasyonel-maddi metodolojik yaklaşım çerçevesinde

yürütülmüş, devletlerin resmî savunma bütçeleri, askeri tedarik programları ve resmî hukuki pozisyonları rasyonel davranışın temel göstergeleri olarak kabul edilmiştir.

Güç Geçişi Teorisi, uluslararası sistemde statükoyu temsil eden güç ile yükselen meydan okuyucu arasında güç paritesine yaklaşılmamasının çatışma olasılığını artırdığını ileri sürmektedir. Lemke (2002) ise bu yaklaşımı küresel sistemin alt düzeylerine uyarlayarak, uluslararası sistem içerisinde birbirinden görece bağımsız işleyen bölgesel hiyerarşilerin varlığını savunmaktadır. Bu teorik çerçeveden hareketle Ege Denizi'nde devam eden çözümsüzlük, diplomasinin başarısızlığının veya hukuki düzenlemelerin yetersizliğinin bir sonucu olarak değil, güç paritesine yaklaşan aktörlerin geçiş sürecinde ortaya çıkan belirsizlikleri yönetebilmek amacıyla hukuki çerçeveleri stratejik biçimde araçsallaştırmalarının bir ürünü olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bu bağlamda mevcut durum, tarafların karşılıklı caydırıcılık temelinde sürdürdüğü "yönetilen denge" niteliği taşımaktadır.

Ege'deki yapısal kilitlenmenin hukuki boyutu ise statükoyu korumayı amaçlayan hak temelli yaklaşım ile Türkiye'nin savunduğu hakkaniyet esaslı sınırlandırma anlayışı arasındaki normatif farklılıktan beslenmektedir. Ege Denizi'nin yarı kapalı yapısı ve Anadolu ana karasına oldukça yakın konumlanan çok sayıda ada, hukuki tercihlerin jeostratejik sonuçlarını diğer deniz alanlarına kıyasla çok daha belirgin hâle getirmektedir. Deniz hukukunun temel ilkelerinden biri olan "kara denize hâkimdir" ilkesi, deniz yetki alanlarının kıyı devletlerinin kara egemenliğinden kaynaklandığını ifade etmektedir. Bu çerçevede Yunanistan, BMDHS'nin 3. maddesine dayanarak karasularını on iki deniz miline kadar genişletme hakkına sahip olduğunu, ayrıca 121. madde uyarınca adaların da ana karalarla aynı deniz yetki alanlarına, yani kıta sahanlığı ve münhasır ekonomik bölgeye sahip olması gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Buna karşılık Türkiye, BMDHS'ne taraf olmamakla birlikte, Ege gibi kendine özgü coğrafi özellikler taşıyan yarı kapalı denizlerde sınırlandırmanın örf ve adet hukuku ile hakkaniyet ilkeleri temelinde gerçekleştirilmesi gerektiğini ileri sürmektedir.

Çalışmada teorik olarak ileri sürülen bölgesel güç geçişi ve kapasite yakınsaması, 2024-2025 dönemine ilişkin mali ve operasyonel göstergeler üzerinden ampirik olarak da değerlendirilmektedir. SIPRI'nin 2025 verilerine göre Türkiye'nin yıllık savunma harcamaları yaklaşık 25,8 milyar ABD dolarına ulaşırken, Yunanistan'ın savunma bütçesi yaklaşık 8,01 milyar ABD doları seviyesinde kalmıştır. Bununla birlikte savunma harcamalarının gayrisafi yurt içi hasılaya oranı incelendiğinde farklı bir görünüm ortaya çıkmaktadır. Yunanistan, mevcut statükoyu sürdürebilmek amacıyla millî gelirinin yaklaşık %3,0'ını savunmaya ayırırken, Türkiye daha büyük ekonomik kapasitesinin sağladığı avantajla bu oranı %1,9 düzeyinde tutmaktadır.

Güç geçişi sürecinin en önemli dinamiklerinden biri ise Türkiye'nin savunma sanayiinde ulaştığı yerlilik kapasitesidir. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Savunma Sanayii Başkanlığı'nın 2024 Faaliyet Raporu'na göre savunma sanayiindeki yerlilik oranı yaklaşık %80 seviyesine ulaşmıştır. Aynı dönemde TCG Anadolu (L-400) amfibi hücum gemisinin hizmete alınması ve Bayraktar TB3 insansız hava araçlarıyla entegre edilmesi, Türkiye'ye yarı kapalı denizlerde bağımsız güç projeksiyonu gerçekleştirebilme kapasitesi kazandırmıştır. Buna ek olarak MİLGEM korvetleri ile havadan bağımsız tahrik (AIP) sistemine sahip Reis sınıfı denizaltılar, dış tedarik zincirlerine olan bağımlılığı azaltarak Türkiye'nin kendi deniz doktrinini yerli imkânlarla uygulayabilmesine olanak sağlamaktadır. Buna karşılık Yunanistan, FDI sınıfı fırkateynler ile Rafale savaş uçakları gibi yüksek maliyetli dış tedarik programları aracılığıyla mevcut askeri dengeyi korumaya yönelmekte, başka bir ifadeyle statükoyu büyük ölçüde dış kaynaklı askeri-teknolojik modernizasyon üzerinden sürdürmeye çalışmaktadır. Ege'deki bölgesel hiyerarşi mücadelesi, deniz yetki alanlarının sınırlandırılmasıyla sınırlı olmayıp karasuları rejimi, gayri askerî statüdeki adalar ve deniz kaynaklarının kullanımı gibi farklı uyumsuzluk alanlarını da kapsamaktadır. 1923 Lozan Barış Antlaşması ile üç deniz mili olarak belirlenen karasuları genişliği, ilerleyen süreçte her iki devlet tarafından tek taraflı olarak altı deniz miline çıkarılmıştır. Bununla birlikte, Yunanistan'ın karasularını on iki deniz miline genişletme ihtimali, Ege Denizi'nin kendine özgü coğrafi yapısı nedeniyle mevcut statükoyu köklü biçimde değiştirebilecek bir gelişme olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Başeren'in (2006) hesaplamalarına göre, karasularının on iki deniz miline çıkarılması hâlinde Yunan karasularının Ege Denizi'ndeki payı %38,66'dan %60,33'e yükselecek, buna karşılık açık deniz alanı %48,85'ten %19,71'e gerileyecektir. Türkiye, böyle bir durumun Anadolu kıyılarının denize erişimini önemli ölçüde sınırlandıracığını, Türk deniz kuvvetleri ile ticaret gemilerinin uluslararası sulara

ulaşımını coğrafi açıdan güçleştireceğini değerlendirmekte ve bu nedenle söz konusu girişimi resmî olarak casus belli olarak nitelendirmektedir.

Bölgesel güç geçişi sürecinin sahadaki en belirgin yansımalarından biri de Doğu Ege adalarının silahsızlandırılmış statüsüne ilişkin tartışmalardır. Lozan Barış Antlaşması'nın 12 ve 13. maddeleri ile 1947 Paris Barış Antlaşması, Midilli, Sakız ve Oniki Ada başta olmak üzere belirli adaları bölgesel stratejik dengeyi korumaya yönelik olarak silahsızlandırılmış statüye tabi tutmuştur. Türkiye, bu adaların silahlandırılmasını yalnızca ilgili antlaşmaların ihlali olarak değil, aynı zamanda bölgesel güç dengesini kendi aleyhine değiştirmeye yönelik fiili bir güvenlik tehdidi olarak değerlendirmektedir. Buna karşılık Yunanistan, söz konusu askeri konuşlandırmaların değişen güvenlik koşulları ve meşru müdafaa hakkı çerçevesinde hukuki dayanağa sahip olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Böylece aynı uluslararası hukuk metinleri, tarafların farklı güvenlik algıları ve stratejik öncelikleri doğrultusunda farklı biçimlerde yorumlanmaktadır.

Sonuç olarak çalışma, Ege Denizi'nde devam eden uyuşmazlıkların yalnızca uluslararası deniz hukukuna ilişkin teknik yorum farklılıklarıyla açıklanamayacağını ileri sürmektedir. Aksine, tarafların hukuki tezleri, bölgesel güç dağılımındaki değişim, kapasite yakınsaması ve hiyerarşik dönüşüm süreçleriyle birlikte değerlendirilmelidir. Güç Geçişi Teorisi ile Çoklu Hiyerarşi Modeli birlikte ele alındığında, Ege'de uzun yıllardır devam eden çözümsüzlüğün hukuki belirsizliklerden ziyade bölgesel güç geçişinin ürettiği yapısal bir denge durumunu yansıttığı görülmektedir. Bu çerçevede hukuki argümanlar, tarafların yalnızca uluslararası hukuka ilişkin farklı yorumlarını değil, aynı zamanda değişen bölgesel güç ilişkileri içerisinde statükoyu koruma veya yeniden şekillendirme yönündeki stratejik tercihlerini de yansıtan araçlar olarak işlev görmektedir.