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Greek Foreign Policy in Defence of the National Interest: Teetering between Exceptionalism and Integration

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explain how crisis-ridden Greece defines and defends its national interest. The constellation of the twin economic and migration crises coupled with the increasingly transactional nature of the global order have forced Greece's hand in sticking to its guns with regard to its membership in both NATO and the European Union. While deterrence vis-à-vis Turkey remains a high priority, Greece has had to labour to regain its status and credibility within both aforementioned organizations by evolving away from its traditional policy of balancing between its membership obligations in NATO and the EU and its more nuanced approach to relations with Russia in contrast to many other countries. This has been done with the consensual adoption across the mainstream political spectrum of a policy of strategic realism which sees a distancing from the Euro-Atlantic context as an anathema, albeit the persistence of the reflex of exceptionalism and ethno-centrism. Its flank state status and the danger of further marginalization at a time of a changing Turkey have forced its hand while also presenting opportunities for the adoption of a renewed positive agenda with its neighbours.

Keywords: National Interest, Foreign Policy, Greece, Transactionalism, Crisis.

Ulusal Çıkar Savunmasında Yunan Dış Politikası: İstisnacılık ve Bütünleşme arasında Bocalama

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, kriz içindeki Yunanistan'ın ulusal çıkarını nasıl tanımladığı ve savunduğunu açıklamayı amaç edinmektedir. Ekonomik ve göç krizlerinin yarattığı zincir etkisi Yunanistan'ı, küresel düzenin artan dönüştürücü etkisi altındaki değişimlerle birlikte, NATO ve AB'de sertliği içeren araçlarını kullanmaya mecbur bıraktı. Türkiye'ye yönelik caydırıcılık öncelikli olmakla birlikte, Yunanistan'ın NATO ve AB, içerisindeki konum ve saygınlığını yeniden kazanması için bu iki örgüt arasında dengelemeyi öngören geleneksel politikasından uzaklaşması ve diğer birçok ülkeden farklı olarak Rusya ile ilişkilerine daha hassas bir yaklaşım göstermesi gerekti. Bu politika, istisnacılığın ve etno-merkezçiliğin sürekliliğine rağmen, Avrupa-Atlantik bağlamından uzaklaşmayı bir olumsuzluk gören stratejik gerçekçilik politikasının ana akım politik spektrumu üzerinden kabulü ile yapıldı. Kanat ülke olma konumunun yanı sıra değişen ve giderek daha da marjinalleşme ihtimali olan Türkiye ile komşu konumu Yunanistan'ın komşularıyla ilişkilerde yapıcı bir gündemi ortaya koymasına da fırsat verdi.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ulusal Çıkar, Dış Politika, Yunanistan, Etkileşimselcilik, Kriz

Introduction

Defining and promoting the national interest is a tricky undertaking. It has long been debated and studied by scholars in particular with relation to the great powers. It has also recently been popularized again with Graham Allison's writings on the Thucydides trap; i.e., the notion that when a great power threatens to displace another, war may ensue as has been the case most of the time over the last 500 years. In order to avoid conflict, Allison suggests that "coherent strategy does not guarantee success, but its absence is a reliable route to failure."¹ While Allison's references are to the great powers historically, in the case of a country like Greece, just like any other country, some of the lessons derived are just as pertinent. A cursory look at the 2018 Global Firepower Index which ranks the war-making capabilities of some 136 nations across the globe, Greece ranks 28th while it ranks 7th among the 28 European Union member states, and 10th among NATO's 29 members.² In contrast, Turkey, Greece's NATO ally yet the country Greece perceives to be its greatest potential threat, ranks 9th out of 136 while it is 4th among NATO nations. These figures are all the more relevant considering that the country's population is 11.1 million as per the OECD with a 27,700 USD per capita GDP compared to Turkey's 76.9 million population and 27,078 USD per capita GDP.³ Nevertheless, deterrence has its limits, especially for a bankrupted country like Greece, in the face of a bigger and more powerful neighbour. Deterrence on its own, especially for a small country like Greece, could lead to a military escalation if it is not ensconced within the context of other foreign policy initiatives and fora which act as levers regulating the behaviours of states.

For an EU member state like Greece, the national interest is thus intertwined with the European Union's interest and its definition as a soft power and as global power as interpreted in the Union's European Security Strategy of December 2003 and its Global Strategy of June 2016. Yet for crisis-racked Greece, the national interest verges on the national sentiment which at times leans closer to exceptionalism rather than the pursuit of greater integration, and by extension, influence within the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance. In fact, a mitigating factor is the country's geography which has enhanced the notion of the country being a flank state, on the margins of all the integrative processes in Europe and the West. This perception has not changed in the post-Cold War era as the migration crisis emanating in part from the Syrian conflict acts as a reminder of the country being a bulwark. The continued toil in maintaining non-conflictual relations with NATO ally and neighbour Turkey has not helped either in changing the dichotomic interpretation of the country's identity, and by extension, its national interest. Does Greece belong to the West or does it stand alone? How do these perceptions shape its foreign policy elite and decision makers in clearly identifying and acting in favour of the defence of the national interest? The *problematique* for Greece is compounded by the fact that its neighbours to the East and the North are also caught up in their own cases of reconsideration regarding their identity and sense of belonging. The most apt example is the case of Turkey which finds itself in conflict as to whether it has a place in the West and all things western or whether it has to reformulate its direction in favour of a Turkey first concept. Turkey itself faces many, if not more of the same dilemmas as Greece, given its flank state status sharing borders with some highly volatile and ambitious neighbours, whether they are greater or lesser powers. To the North, the inability to totally

1 Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap", *Foreign Policy*, No.228, 9 June 2017, p.80-81, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/09/the-thucydides-trap/> (Accessed on 1 July 2018).

2 2018 Military Strength Ranking, Global Firepower Index <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp> (Accessed on 1 July 2018).

3 OECD Data, <https://data.oecd.org/> (Accessed on 1 July 2018).

tame the fires stemming from the end of the Cold War and the demise of Yugoslavia, and to integrate the countries in the region in the European mainstream has allowed for a surge in Russian influence at a time when the markings of a new Cold War or Cold Peace between Russia and the United States are in evidence. This also entails an increase and awareness of Russian exceptionalism which in defence of its national interest could potentially influence the course of Greece and its neighbouring countries. Likewise, the increased Chinese presence via the Belt Road Initiative and the relevance of Greek assets such as the port of Piraeus for its realization also leaves its indelible mark. Finally, the renewed interest in hydrocarbons given their presence in the region, especially the Eastern Mediterranean, and its transit realities also shape the current geopolitical landscape.

Defending the National Interest in Times of Crisis

Under normal circumstances, (i.e. non-crisis times) the task of defining and defending the Greek national interest would be challenging. In this crisis-laden era, the task is daunting. How does Greece cope? Or more significantly, how can Greece promote its national prerogatives given the parameters of its geographic, geopolitical, political, institutional, economic, social, and ideological realities. A cursory look at the website of the Greek Foreign Ministry clearly places the context within which the country's foreign policy operates: "Greek foreign policy is designed to serve the national interest. In today's globalized environment, this means that foreign policy must be developed across a broad spectrum, from traditional diplomacy and the cultivation of Greece's bilateral relations to our country's participation in the European Union and other international organizations."⁴ How this is done and whether the country's political and bureaucratic elites understand what today's 'globalized environment' entails is not entirely clear given the rise in transactional politics in lieu of a grand strategy, norms, and values. This becomes even more pressing since transactionalism has come to represent the Trump administration's foreign policy approach. According to Thomas Carothers, Donald Trump is a "disruptor".⁵ He is "a postmodern president; he's history-free, fact-free, structure-free, and protocol-free. He is acting in ways that belie the last 60 years of assumed history of the United States and the world, and the way the world is organized."⁶ Consequently, with his combative approach, he produces polarization in the United States, "which also brings out fundamental differences between U.S. and European politics. European politics is much more about consensus, civility, and continuity."⁷

Thus, a mid-sized EU member state as well as one within the Euro-Atlantic context that is Greece has to tackle and defend its national interest *vis-à-vis* a middle power with global ambitions that is Turkey as well as, over a quarter century after the end of the Cold War, persisting instability to its North as the ideological veneer that separated the country from its northern neighbours has been replaced by unresolved concerns of irredentism albeit within a process of incomplete integration in Euro-Atlantic structures. Consequently, of the four countries with which Greece has land borders (Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia [FYROM], Bulgaria, and Turkey), it only has normalized relations with Bulgaria. With Albania, a technical state of war since the Second World War is still in place from the time when Italian occupation forces in Albania attacked Greece in

4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic, <https://www.mfa.gr/en/foreign-policy/> (Accessed on 15 April 2018).

5 Thomas Carothers, "Trump the Disruptor", *Carnegie Europe*, 10 July 2018, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/76776> (Accessed on 10 July 2018).

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

October 1940. Although the two countries signed a Friendship, Cooperation, Good Neighbourliness and Security Agreement on 21 March 1996 and Greece has been a steadfast supporter of Albania's membership in NATO in 2009 and its accession to the European Union, the technical state of war remains. The concern regarding Albanian irredentism remains strong as long as the future status of Kosovo remains unresolved and the tenuous arrangement between the Slav Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority in FYROM is not consolidated. Furthermore, the ethnic Albanian Cham exiles, i.e., Albanians expelled from Northern Greece after the Second World War on the pretext of collaborating with the German occupying forces, and their demands to return to the regions in Greece from which they were expelled, as well as concerns regarding the implementation of European standards for the protection of the rights of the Greek minority in Albania which ranges somewhere between two to seven percent of the population, compound relations between the two countries.⁸

With FYROM, relations seem on the mend after more than a quarter century of acrimonious differences over FYROM's constitutional name and its international usage, stemming from the perceived irredentism connotations the exclusive usage of the name "Macedonia" may have on the Greek region by the same name and the historical, cultural, and linguistic links of ancient Macedonia to modern Greece. With the signing of the Prespes Agreement on 17 June 2018, Greece and FYROM agreed to end their bilateral dispute with each addressing the concerns of the other side. This has led to agreement for a compound new name with geographical designation – North Macedonia – applied both domestically and internationally (*erga omnes*) and the requisite amendment of FYROM's constitution as well as the acceptance of a Macedonian language as part of the Slavic family of languages (thereby clearly denoting that the linkages to ancient Macedonia are non-existent) and the designation of the nationality as Macedonian/Citizens of North Macedonia in exchange for the promise of starting accession negotiations to NATO and the EU. The accord also contains a number of clauses with a positive agenda in mind that stress the "intensification and enrichment of relations" between the two countries. It is subject to ratification by both sides amid major protests both in Greece and FYROM by many that refuse to compromise on the issue.⁹ This agreement comes on the heels of the 1 August 2017 Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation between Bulgaria and FYROM which also promotes a forward-looking and positive agenda while leaving issues of identity such as the non-recognition of a Macedonian language by Bulgaria to constructive interpretations.

With Turkey, the number of challenges for Greek foreign policy are many albeit the fact that the two countries are currently in a phase of rapprochement that began in 1999 following devastating earthquakes in both Greece and Turkey which led to the mobilization of their civil society to help the other in times of need. Nevertheless, albeit significant negotiations at the diplomatic level and a number of high level bilateral visits, many bilateral contentious issues and the resolution of the Cyprus problems continue to plague the relationship. With the passage of time, tensions have multiplied as the prospect of enhanced hydrocarbon finds in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as the stalling of Ankara's EU accession bid and the ever-growing transactional nature of international

8 See for example, Miranda Vickers, "The Greek Minority in Albania – Current Issues", *Research and Assessment Branch, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom*, 10 February 2010, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/111787/2010_01_\\$Balkan%20Series%200110%20WEB.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/111787/2010_01_$Balkan%20Series%200110%20WEB.pdf) (Accessed on 15 April 2018).

9 Text of the "Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences as Described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the termination of the Interim Accord of 1995 and the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Two Countries", 12 June 2018, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/resources/article-files/aggliko-1.pdf> (Accessed on 14 June 2018).

relations have further complicated relations. As such, the Greek strategy of supporting Turkey's EU accession bid since the recognition of Turkey as a candidate for accession at the Helsinki European Council of December 1999 and the beginning of accession negotiations in October 2005 does not suffice anymore to regulate relations between the two countries within the normative, rules-based parameters of Turkey's negotiations with the European Union.

The aforementioned brief overview of relations with Greece's immediate neighbours as well as its defining of its national interest via the prism of European Union membership has remained relatively unchanged in the post-Cold War period. Writing back in 2006, the author identified four dimensions to Greek foreign policy including the Europeanisation of Greek foreign policy; relations with Turkey; the state of affairs in the Balkans; and the Euro-Atlantic context.¹⁰ These have not fundamentally changed although much has. In particular, the endemic challenges such as the rise of populism, BREXIT, and the migration conundrum to the process of Europeanization impact upon foreign-policy making, as well as the viability of the Euro-Atlantic space which is being contested by its leading member – the United States. These contestations in turn impact on the effective functioning of the rules-based international order which had acquired a particular normative and regulatory dimension in the European space given the rise consequently of the notion and practice of transactionalism across the globe and 'liquid alliances' where constant change, fragility, and vulnerability are the order of the day.¹¹ By extension, therefore, the aforementioned four-dimensional model, upon which Greek foreign policy is structured, is too limiting or inadequate to regulate Athens' approach to foreign policy making because both the underlying assumptions regarding Europeanization and the Euro-Atlantic world are facing fundamental challenges. This in turns leads to falling back to exceptionalist or ethno-centric reflexes which are magnified given the perception of the country as a flank state that is basically misunderstood by its partners and allies, especially as it copes with the challenges of the economic, financial, social, and political crisis since 2008 as well as the ensuing emergence of both left-wing and right-wing populism, compounded by the effects of the migration crisis given the country's geographic location.

As a result, in today's increasingly fluid world, where the edifice of the rules-based international order is being dismantled piecemeal by the very powers that created it in the first place in 1945 on the heels of the Second World War, Greece's traditional instincts of fear of insecurity, irredentist neighbours, and meddling by great powers in its foreign and domestic affairs have been reinforced at the same time that these trends are also in evidence among its neighbours. Thus, all scramble to redefine and defend their national interest(s) as they perceive it within the context of today's shifting world order. This is done without consideration to the perspective or rationale of the other neighbouring countries and their interpretation of the actions of the other. In other words, while Şükrü Elekdağ's now infamous 'two and a half war strategy' might be an outrageous anathema to its Greek readers, it

10 Dimitrios Triantaphyllou "The Priorities of Greek Foreign Policy Today", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2005, Vol.5, No.3, p.327-346.

11 See in particular, Eduard Soler i Lecha, "Liquid alliances in the Middle East", *notes internacionals CIDOB 169*, March 2017, https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/n1_169/liquid_alliances_in_the_middle_east (Accessed on 1 May 2018). Soler makes particular reference to Zigmund Bauman's concept of 'liquid modernity' and applies it to the international relations of the Middle East. Writes Soler: "Solid blocs do not exist and when an alliance is forged it is based not on shared identity or a common project but on fear. One-off events change the perception of what or who represents a threat, which is how temporary alliances that are limited to single issues proliferate. They are liquid alliances that adapt to the landscape. Rivalries become liquid too. Actors that are traditionally at odds unite to face specific threats without recognising each other as allies."

needs to be considered in context in Athens.¹² Similarly, the Greek insistence on the application of the 1982 Montego Bay Convention on the Law of the Sea in the long sea border between the two countries needs to be understood in Ankara.

In the Greek case, the reflex of exceptionalism or ethno-centrism is especially evident as the national interest is defined in terms relevant to ethno-centric perceptions of Hellenism under threat that capture the imagination of the public and make their resolution extremely difficult. Alexis Heraclides accounts for five such national interests since 1945 that have guided Greek foreign policy. These include 1) Cyprus and the Cyprus issue since 1945; 2) the Aegean since February 1974; 3) the Macedonian issue since 1990-1991 (although it has its antecedents in 1878); 4) the Northern Epirus issue since 1912 which has evolved to become a concern for the Greek minority in Albania; and 5) the Muslim/Turkish minority in Thrace with reference to the Greek minority in Istanbul.¹³ The safety clause of membership in the EU and NATO has allowed the country, and, in particular, its foreign policy making elites to regulate the pervasive nationalism that has led in the past the country down the path of destructive and corrosive adventurism. Examples include the disastrous 1897 war against the Ottoman Empire over the status of the province of Crete without the support of any Allied powers; the 1922 Asia Minor campaign without any support from the Entente that led to the total pushback of Greek forces; and the 1974 attempt by the Greek military Junta to seek enosis or union with Cyprus with the *coup d'état* to oust President Makarios from office leading in part to today's stalemate in the island. These actions have come about as 'national interests' have been interpreted in populist parlance as 'national rights' in order to restore or to complete the spatial process of the incomplete national 'integrity' or 'integration' for which the country had been perceived to be wrongly denied by the great powers or its irredentist neighbours.

EU membership allowed Greece's elites to instil a sense of 'normalization' in the country's foreign relations with the Europeanization of the country's foreign policy together with the ensuing socialization process of its bureaucratic structure. Coupled with the UN regulatory framework which delegitimizes foreign adventurism, the quest for membership in the institutional processes of European integration allowed Greece to redefine its national interest. Hence, Spyros Economides correctly asserts that "the Europeanisation of Greek foreign policy has occurred in the domain of the translocation of Greek foreign policy preferences and interests in at least two key issue areas, Turkey and Cyprus, onto the EU agenda.... While the *style* of Greek foreign policy has become Europeanised under the impact of EU membership, Greek policy-makers have, at various times and in a variety of ways, Europeanised the *substance* of their foreign policy."¹⁴ In fact, as the process of the Western Balkan states seems to be moving forward however slowly, both the FYROM name issue and the differences with Albania, have also become part of the translocation process of Greek foreign policy preferences.

In the Greek case, a 'bottom up' approach has been applied where "national interests and policy preferences are neither usurped nor transformed by a European foreign policy agenda but rather are projected onto it."¹⁵ Dyson and Goetz provide a working definition of the Europeanization of foreign policy by defining it as "a complex interactive top-down and bottom-up process in which national

12 See Şükrü Elekdağ, "2 ½ War Strategy", *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.1, No.1, 1996.

13 Alexis Heraclides, "Εθνικά θέματα και εθνοκεντρισμός" (National Interests' and Ethno-centrism), *Chronos*, No.61, 24 May 2018, <https://chronos.fairead.net/irakleidis-ethnokentrismos> (Accessed on 1 June 2018).

14 Spyros Economides, "The Europeanisation of Greek Foreign Policy", *West European Politics*, Vol.28, No.2, 2005, p.471-491.

15 Ibid.

foreign policies are shaped by the EU foreign policy regime and in which national policy-makers use this regime to shape foreign policy outcomes.”¹⁶ As such, according to Apostolos Agnantopoulos, for Greece, the Europeanization of its foreign policy has meant the synthesis of the use of the mechanisms of Europeanization and a shift from negative conditionality towards positive conditionality, in particular, with regard to Turkey’s EU accession process.¹⁷ This new approach brought together, from a Greek standpoint, three interrelated perspectives in support of Turkey’s EU bid:

[F]irstly, that the offer of conditional support to Turkey’s membership prospect would relieve Greece of the accumulated burden entailed in the frequent use of the veto, while exposing those who were concealing their own objections behind Greece’s negative stance. Secondly, that any loss of diplomatic lever entailed by the renunciation of veto would be compensated by the fact that Turkey’s conformity and cooperation would be subject not only to Greek supervision but to an institutionalized EU monitoring mechanism. Thirdly, that the accession process would unleash a process of political and economic reform within Turkey which would lead to the adoption of EU principles and the abandonment of its revisionist behaviour.¹⁸

It also enhanced a number of other processes within Greece related to Europeanisation as it strengthened the identification of the country as belonging to the West via the process of Westernization brought about by the impulse to join the European Community in the 1970s on security grounds in order to account for the challenges to its national interest and the sentiment of marginalization that had been enhanced during the seven-year rule by the military Junta between 1967 and 1974. It was also perceived as boosting the country’s modernization which meant more to a small country like Greece than either economic development or democratic consolidation.¹⁹ As Economides correctly suggests, “[i]n terms of the Greek pursuit of accession, to modernise was to Westernise, and to Westernise was to achieve accession and thus to Europeanise.”²⁰ Finally, Europeanization has also meant or implied a sense of normalization in terms of foreign policy making. For example, in the case of its approach towards Turkey, the EU framework has both allowed both for the multilateralization and partial denationalization of Greek foreign policy in that while Turkey remains a bilateral concern, it is “firmly tied in with Turkey’s path to the EU.”²¹

Writing in the Hellenic issue of *Foreign Affairs* in 2012, Yannis Valinakis, a former Deputy Foreign Minister expounded on the attempts by the Greek government between 2004 and 2009 to address the issue of the country’s maritime borders in the Ionian and the Mediterranean (Eastern Mediterranean) seas while trying to influence the European Union to move progressively towards a European Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).²² This matter has become particularly relevant given the potential for hydrocarbons in the seabed of all the three aforementioned seas as well as the

16 Kenneth Dyson and Klaus H Goetz, “Living with Europe: Power, constraint and contestation”, Kenneth Dyson and Klaus H Goetz (eds.), In *Germany, Europe and the Politics of Constraint*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p.3-35.

17 Apostolos Agnantopoulos, “The Europeanization of national foreign policy: explaining Greek support for Turkey’s EU accession”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol.13, No.1, 2013, p.67-87.

18 Ibid.

19 See, in particular Loukas Tsoukalis, *What Kind of Europe?*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.

20 Spyros Economides, “The Europeanisation of Greek Foreign Policy”, *West European Politics*, Vol.28, No.2, 2005, p.471-491.

21 Ibid. See also, Ian O Lesser et al., *Greece’s New Geopolitics*, Santa Monica, Rand Cooperation, 2001.

22 Yannis Valinakis, “Το σχέδιο «Ελλάς επί Τέσσερα»” (The ‘Greece by Four’ Project), *Foreign Affairs Hellenic Edition*, 12 June 2012, <https://www.foreignaffairs.gr/articles/68831/giannis-balinakis/to-sxedio-%C2%ABellas-epi-tessera%C2%BB> (Accessed on 25 June 2018).

exploitation of all marine resources including fishing and the use of energy from water and wind. The initiative meant initiating talks with Italy and Albania in the Ionian Sea, with Libya, Egypt, and Cyprus in the Mediterranean in an attempt to regulate the status of Greece's EEZ and eventually use the established legal and regulatory framework to influence the status of talks with Turkey regarding the Aegean on this issue. Though the diplomatic effort is ongoing, it serves to remind Greece of the benefits its membership in the European Union which as suggested above has enhanced its 'Westernness', contributed to its modernization, and its ability to use its membership to regulate national prerogatives via the denationalized EU framework, albeit the fact that this effort touches upon the country's bilateral ties with some of its key neighbours.

Greece and the Atlantic Community: There is no Alternative

For Greece, the answer to the question as to whether the Atlantic community is still needed in the 21st century is an emphatic yes. Yet, the reality is that the aforementioned conclusion is not easily derived and easily accepted in Greece for a variety of reasons related to its geography and its political, social, and economic realities. In other words, a combination of domestic and external factors influence Greece in defining its relations with the West and the significance of the West for it. These factors fundamentally raise the question as to which 'West' is relevant applies.

As a small flank state with external borders in a geographic environment in constant flux, Greece has had to tread very carefully in defining its foreign policy, as well as fundamental identity, preferences. Where does it belong? To itself and its own exceptionalism imbued with the long historical tradition of Hellenism which has contributed to the development and evolution of Western civilization and its values, and, by extension, to today's West? Or as part of the West, where it is not a leading power, and therefore, unable to shape it in the sense that it feels that its interests are defended and protected properly, albeit recognizing the importance of belonging to an Alliance of like-minded states?

One may ask as to why it has had to plod carefully in defining its identity preferences. After all, isn't it the role of its governing elites to steer the country and commit it to the West, represented both by the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union? Though the commitment to the West and the Atlantic community has been steadfast, at least since the end of the Second World War, it has come about at the expense of tremendous political polarization which saw the country in the throes of a deadly civil war between 1946 and 1949 whose wounds have not yet been fully healed. While the Communist left was defeated and the pro-American and Western right won, society and politics, by extension, have remained remarkably ideologically polarized to this day although all sides have adopted a realist perspective in terms of identifying the country's main perceived threat – Turkey, and lesser ones, though no less irrelevant, such as the perceived irredentisms of some of Greece's Balkan neighbours.

In other words, patriotism, or even nationalism (or ethno-centrism), has been the bedrock of national consensus in a deeply polarized society. The logic is simple: 'nobody, in particular some of our most powerful allies, understand us and our concerns, hence we can only trust ourselves.' The recent and ongoing fallout over the agreement ending the nearly three-decade old dispute between Greece and FYROM over the latter's name is a case in point. Although, the radical-left led SYRIZA government has initiated the process culminating in the agreement, it has only been able to do so

in a polarizing manner as it is being accused across all sides of the political spectrum of ‘selling out’ the nation. In order to peddle the deal domestically, instead of seeking consensus with the main opposition parties, it has tried to demonstrate that its predecessors in office while negotiating the issue were willing to cede much more to the other side in order to derive an agreement than the current government actually has. As a postscript, it should be noted that the perception of a ‘sell out’ of the national interest in this case comes because of pressure from some of the key stakeholders in the Euro-Atlantic community – i.e., the United States and Germany, inter alia – never mind the fact that their primary motivation for a resolution of the issue which would facilitate FYROM’s accession process into NATO and the EU is to reduce regional instability (which is a Greek interest as well) and to curb Russian influence or attempts to act as an opportunist and a disruptor in South Eastern Europe.²³

The process of European integration has allowed Greece to nuance its dilemmas by seeking membership in the European Economic Community (EEC) as early as 1959. The institutional construct of the EEC allowed for Greece, just like every medium and small state, to feel that it had more ownership of the process than NATO with its dominant *primus inter pares* member state, the United States. In fact, since joining in 1981, Greece has sought to be a part of every core group initiative within the EU, be it joining the Eurozone, being involved in all foreign policy and defence initiatives, and using all political and legal instruments at its disposal to influence the enlargement process, especially when the latter encompasses Cyprus’ membership in 2004 as well as the country’s immediate Balkan neighbours to the North and, especially Turkey in the East.

As a consequence, the notion of the West over time became more acceptable in the Greek mainstream as, at least, its European component enabled it to perceive itself as a co-owner in shaping the continent’s future in juxtaposition to the wider geopolitical considerations at play when it came to NATO’s relations with Turkey and Greece’s northern neighbours. This also applies to the Alliance’s relations with Russia which with the ongoing decade long financial and economic crisis that the country is undergoing and the tough bailout terms negotiated with leading creditors such as Germany led a significant segment of the population and, by extension, its political elite to seek solace in the solace in the notion that only Orthodox Russia comprehends Greece and the Greek soul. Russia has also been seen as a useful counterweight to an increasingly pro-active Turkey in its quest to redefine itself as more than a regional power.

Nevertheless, over the long haul, with the prevalence of strategic realism on the part of the Greek public and its political elites, the idea of Greece outside the Euro-Atlantic space is an anathema as there is acknowledgement that it is the only mechanism or process that can best protect the national interest albeit the periodic flirtation with exceptionalism or Russia. The radical left, anti-West SYRIZA that came to power in 2015 leading a populist reactionary wave has been slowly transforming itself into a mainstream centre left pro-Western party, much like the anti-West PASOK did over time upon coming to power in 1981, as the realization has sunk in that the multiple regional and global challenges faced by the country cannot be dealt effectively on its own or by riding on the coattails of other non-western powers. This has become even more evident as the attempt to reverse the economic downturn has been compounded by the migration crisis where Greece’s geography places the country at the forefront of efforts to regulate it.

23 See, for example Dimitar Betchev, “The Reach and Limits of Russian Influence,” *American Interest*, 23 October 2017, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/10/23/reach-limit-russian-influence-balkans/> (Accessed on 15 June 2018).

In other words, although it finds itself in the midst of a crisis-prone and divided EU and a revisionist United States in terms of whether it considers the Atlantic community relevant, for Greece, there is no substitute to the strengthening of both its European component as well as seeking transatlantic cohesion notwithstanding its instincts towards exceptionalism or other alternative arrangements.

Strengthening its Hand

Hence, for a medium-sized EU member state like Greece, the value of alliances and sticking to them is key as is the ability to shape their direction and discourse. In attempting to identify whether a such a thing as a left-wing foreign policy is possible in today's age especially for a small- or medium-sized state like Greece, Sotiris Roussos of the University of the Peloponnese suggests that the moral strength of a left-wing government is to stick to its values such as adherence to international law and its principles and ensure that these are safeguarded and promoted within the international institutions it plays an active role in. It also should acknowledge that a small or medium sized country cannot change the international division of power or the nature of the capitalist system; it should thus seek to influence its neighbourhood by building regional cooperation schemes which focus on economic and cultural cooperation. Finally, it can seek to be a conduit with a growing number of constructive non-state actors that seek to contribute to the stability of the international order.²⁴ In fact, the trend is a symbiosis between ideological opposites and a realisation that strategic realism is the only possible fulcrum to defend the national interest.

In other words, if realism as Stephen Walt suggests, is the theory that explains best today's global trends, Greece needs both to respect the value of alliances and partnerships as well as seek to strengthen its hand outside them.²⁵ For example, one of the consequences of Turkey's perceived evolution away from the West, at a time both of transactional power politics and energy competition in the Eastern Mediterranean, has been a concerted effort by Greece for a multidimensional foreign policy which has led to enhanced political, economic, military, and economic cooperation with Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt.²⁶ This has been occurring both bilaterally as well as within trilateral or quadrilateral formats. Similarly, Greece has been enhancing its role in the Balkans by promoting the Balkan 4 quadrilateral format between Southeast European EU member states -Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia prioritizing support for enlargement and energy cooperation. It has also encouraged coordination meetings between the Balkan 4 and the Visegrad 4 (Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Poland) as the May 2018 meeting in Sounion attests. It has also been favouring a quadrilateral with Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria. In the Mediterranean, Greece has played an active role in launching the Mediterranean EU countries' Summit in Athens in 2016 with the participation of the heads of state or government of Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain. Although regional

24 Sotiris Roussos, "Υπάρχει αριστερή εξωτερική πολιτική;" (Does a leftist foreign policy exist?), *Dromos tis Aristeras*, 8 June 2016. <https://www.e-dromos.gr/yparxei-aristerh-exwterikh-politikh/> (Accessed on 15 June 2018).

25 Stephen M. Walt, "The World Wants You to Think Like a Realist," *Foreign Policy*, 30 May 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/30/the-world-wants-you-to-think-like-a-realist/> (Accessed on 15 July 2018).

26 See, for example, George Tzogopoulos, "The Future of Greek-Israeli Relations", The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 8 April 2018, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/greece-israel-relations/> (Accessed on 10 June 2018). See also, John M. Nomikos, "Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean Alliance" The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 17 July 2018, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/greece-israel-cyprus-alliance/> (Accessed on 17 July 2018).

cooperation initiatives in the Balkans and the Mediterranean are not necessarily new with antecedents during the Cold War period, this renewed activism on the part of Athens reflects an attempt to be a constructive and influential player in a number of policy debates within the European and Euro-Atlantic contexts at a time when its credibility and status have taken a hit due to the economic crisis.

In fact, this activism is a qualitative upgrade from Greece's traditional act of balancing between its NATO and EU obligations and its more nuanced approach to relations with Russia in contrast to many other countries. The unprecedented expulsion of four Russian diplomats in July 2018, amidst accusations that Russia was trying to foment opposition to the recent agreement between Greece and FYROM, is indicative of Greece's turn to strategic realism. Similarly, the current government's willingness to renew the Mutual Defence Cooperation Agreement with the United States allowing for American military forces to use the naval base in Souda, Crete and the temporary use of the Larisa Air Force Base for the use of MQ-9 Reaper drones by the US Air Force is also telling.

The danger for Greece is being caught between its desire to ensure that the European Union survives its current multiple challenges albeit its current inability "to transcend nationalism and subordinate state interests within broader supranational institutions" as evidenced by the rise of populism in many member states.²⁷ It also feels the pressure of what Gideon Rachman refers to as the emergence of a Trump-led 'nationalist international' which are hostile to international organizations and treaties, immigration, and favour economic protectionism.²⁸ As its economy is slowly being stabilized and the incipient signs of growth make their appearance, while its prestige and credibility are being restored, the diffusion of the Euro-Atlantic space and the European Union coupled with the modulating distancing of Turkey's foreign policy from the West, the slow pace of the Europeanization of South-eastern Europe, persistent Russian opportunism, the EEZ cum hydrocarbons tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the inability to fathom an equitable solution to the pressures of illegal and irregular migration, the defence of the national interest becomes an ever more complicated balancing act. Hence, the country finds itself in survival mode as the established benchmarks of foreign policy making are being displaced by the liquid reality of today's global order. It is struggling to remain a part of the European and Euro-Atlantic integrative processes as these evolve while it copes with the populist appeal of ethno-centrism and exceptionalism at home. This strategic realism, on the other hand, also offers the possibility for conciliation and positive agendas with its neighbours as they are also currently undergoing similar re-evaluations of their foreign policy priorities and seeking best options in defence of their national interests.

27 Walt, "The World Wants You to Think Like a Realist".

28 Gideon Rachman, "Donald Trump leads to a global revival of nationalism", *The Financial Times*, 25 June 2018.