

U.S. & Greece: Cementing a Closer Strategic Partnership



JINSA Gemunder Center's Eastern Mediterranean Policy Project - January 2020
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Executive Summary

Dormant for decades, the Eastern Mediterranean is back as a cockpit of competition. New challenges and opportunities for U.S. national security are arising in this historical link between Europe, Asia and Africa. Concerted U.S. engagement with the region is increasingly necessary, both to defend against growing shared threats and to capitalize on strategic realignments already underway.

This imperative is most evident when it comes to America’s relations with Greece. If the Eastern Mediterranean is once again a vital strategic crossroads, then Greece is emerging as the nexus connecting several vital geoeconomic and political issues. More and more, Athens is becoming a crucial, pro-U.S. geopolitical actor at the center of every key security issue in the region.

These issues are manifold. The primary driver of regional change has been Turkey’s transformation under President Erdoğan from a democratic and reliable NATO partner to a pro-Russian autocracy hostile to the West. Increasingly, Ankara’s ambitions point toward greater regional influence, and possibly even predominance, at the direct expense of Greece, Israel, Cyprus, Egypt and other U.S. partners.

A major potential flashpoint between Turkey and these countries comes from the simultaneous discovery of considerable natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean. The prospect of additional energy discoveries raises tensions and the risks of conflict further. Meanwhile, renewed great power competition is bringing with it Russian, Iranian and Chinese inroads, often at U.S. expense, in the Eastern Mediterranean region, from the Levant and North Africa to the Balkans.

In summer 2019, our policy project issued a capstone report identifying these major trends and their implications for U.S. interests and regional stability, as well as calling for renewed American strategic focus to address them.¹ This is now the first in a series of follow-on papers to provide more granular U.S. policy recommendations for the Eastern Mediterranean, beginning with the growing need to strengthen the bilateral security partnership with Athens. Our analysis and prescriptions are informed in part by extensive meetings with current and former high-ranking Greek officials and policy experts.

These major regional developments alone do not explain Greece’s newfound role, but they have helped drive a fundamental reorientation of the country’s foreign policy. Greece has been among America’s more complicated allies in past decades, but now there is growing national consensus in Athens that a strong relationship with the United States should form the bedrock of the country’s security. In parallel, Athens also is building new diplomatic, economic and military partnerships with Jerusalem after decades of cool relations at best.

In a sense, Athens appears to be filling the void left by Turkey’s gradual estrangement from America and the West. Greece aspires to take over Ankara’s role as the southeastern bastion of the Western alliance, and to become a diplomatic and economic hub interlinking Europe and other growing regional players like Israel, Cyprus and Egypt. Importantly, Athens already devotes a higher percentage of GDP to defense spending than any other NATO member save the United States.

Greece's turnaround is all the more remarkable for being led by former Communist Alexis Tsipras, whose strategic acumen clearly was underestimated. Though Tsipras lost last year's national elections, his government's initiatives already are being sustained and expanded by the center-right, traditionally more pro-American New Democracy Party led by Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Indeed, there appears to be an unprecedented degree of consensus on foreign policy matters inside Greece.

Yet, Greece needs deeper U.S. cooperation if it is to become a platform for projecting American power and promoting regional stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. Our policy project has developed a comprehensive set of recommendations for U.S. policymakers to bolster this expanding bilateral relationship, and to promote evolving ties between Greece and other U.S. regional partners.

First, the United States should go beyond rhetorical support for Greece's and Cyprus' trilateral diplomatic fora with Israel and Egypt. Already France and Italy are sending tangible signals of support for their countries' energy companies that are operating amid Turkish interference and intimidation offshore Cyprus. American policymakers must now seriously consider similarly concrete backing to encourage growing regional diplomatic and security ties that are very much in U.S. interests. This would also lend credibility to existing statements of U.S. support, and would defend the legal rights of American companies as they become more involved in energy exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Second, the United States should also strengthen Greece's ability to defend U.S. interests by increasing bilateral military-to-military ties. This means providing meaningful amounts of foreign military financing (FMF) for Greece to purchase U.S. weapons and materiel. Such assistance would enable Athens to do what American policymakers increasingly ask of allies, namely to take on greater responsibilities for collective defense. It also would benefit the American workforce and economy by stimulating demand for U.S. defense exports. The United States also should expand other forms of bilateral security cooperation including International Military Education and Training (IMET) and excess defense articles (EDA). In parallel, and depending on the trajectory of relations with Turkey, American policymakers should begin to consider how they might strengthen the U.S. security relationship with Cyprus, which until December 2019 was largely blocked by a U.S. arms embargo. Consideration of additional steps would have to be undertaken in conjunction with an assessment of broader U.S. efforts to resolve the Cyprus issue as a whole.

Third, the United States should explore options to bolster its own forward military presence in Greece. This could mean increased rotational deployments through various installations and larger presences of forward-based troops at Greek bases, including: expanding the naval base at Souda Bay, establishing a new naval and air base at Alexandroupoli, increasing U.S. Air Force deployments in the country and enhancing U.S. Army training in Greece.

Finally, the United States should also view Greece and potentially Cyprus as viable, and reliable, options for relocating U.S. military assets currently deployed in Turkey. With Greece indicating its willingness to host most or all these forces, American policymakers should explore relocating some forces to Greece and develop options for further relocations in the event that their continued presence in Turkey becomes unsustainable.

The Four Circles: Greek Strategic Thinking

Greece's strategic location near the intersection of three continents, combined with rising challenges from Turkey and major new energy discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean, are forcing its leaders to think increasingly in geopolitical terms.

This differentiates Greece from much of the rest of Europe, where security competition is often considered a vestige of the past – although Vladimir Putin has forced even some further north to begin questioning whether geopolitics are indeed dead. Led by the Hellenic Armed Forces, Greece has come to conceptualize itself as a key geopolitical actor at the center of four circles: the Balkans, Black Sea, Middle East and North Africa. Each of these presents its own problem set for both Greece and the United States, while also creating new opportunities to bolster the U.S.-Greece relationship.

Greece has strong historical and cultural links to the Balkans, including as Athens' physical bridge to the rest of the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but recently the region has seen an uptick in great power competition and tension.

In 2016, Moscow helped orchestrate a coup against Montenegro's government as the country moved closer to NATO membership.² Meanwhile as Turkey's ties with the EU deteriorated, Ankara began developing a more unilateral policy to expand its own influence in the Balkans. It did not coordinate with Brussels, let alone Athens, and its policy took on clearly neo-Ottoman dimensions, particularly during the tenure of Ahmet Davutoglu as Foreign Minister (2009-14). This included a Turkish presence at the Pasha Liman naval facility in Albania and growing Turkish military cooperation with North Macedonia. Turkey's ambitions have caused considerable alarm in Athens. Speaking in June 2018, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias asked rhetorically: "aren't we in danger [when Turkey] trains the army of all our northern neighbors and establishes military bases in our north?"³

China, too, has made considerable inroads in the western Balkans, which along with Greece constitutes a key vector of Chinese influence in Europe. Indeed, China's recent creation of the "16+1" mechanism combines close to a dozen EU member states and Balkan countries as a vehicle for Beijing to exert influence through its investments in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Greece was not initially part of the 16+1 initiative, but officially joined in April 2019.⁴

The importance of the Black Sea region to Greece – exemplified by Athens' decision in 1992 to join the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization – stems primarily from the growing role of energy diplomacy in Greek foreign policy. Athens has long been involved in projects to bring Azerbaijani and Central Asian oil and gas resources to European markets, not least to help reduce the continent's dependence on energy imports from Russia. The Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), currently under construction, connects Greece to the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) at the Turkish border, and will bring natural gas originally from the Caspian basin across Greece and the Adriatic Sea to Italy. Other potential pipelines could connect Greece to Bulgaria and Romania and thereby reduce Moscow's energy leverage over the latter two countries. But Greece's concern with the Black Sea region is also a euphemism for its proximity to Russian expansionism in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, and for Greece's own value as a staging point to flow NATO forces into the Eastern Balkans.

The Middle East and North Africa are often grouped together, but they constitute two separate circles from Greece's perspective. The Middle East represents both peril and opportunity. For years the Syria conflict has been the most immediate regional problem, with hundreds of thousands of migrants seeking to land on Greek islands, and thus EU territory, after transiting Turkey.

Simultaneously, and unlike nearly every other European country, Greece has actively developed or expanded relations with Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE). This diplomatic outreach indicates Greece's efforts to balance both Iran – whose influence across the Middle East has grown greatly in recent years – and particularly the regionwide Turkish-Qatari alignment and their support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

North Africa represents similar challenges for Greece, even if the causes differ. Here, Greece and Italy are effectively the frontlines of Europe's efforts to manage the flow of irregular migration across the Mediterranean from Libya and sub-Saharan Africa. While a March 2016 EU agreement with Turkey managed to contain the flow of migrants into Greek islands – though they picked up again in 2019 – this agreement did not affect arrivals from across the Mediterranean. Greece also looks with concern on Turkey's growing efforts to make itself a diplomatic, economic and military player in the ongoing Libya conflict. This includes recent agreements sending Turkish military advisers to Libya and demarcating a bilateral maritime boundary that violates Greece's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).⁵

Greece views itself as an island of stability between these overlapping arcs of instability. This is the role Turkey has traditionally reserved for itself, and Greece's claim to such a role correlates directly to a sense that Turkey no longer defines its foreign policy on the basis of its role in the Western alliance, but as an independent power whose goals frequently diverge from and occasionally clash with Western priorities. With Turkey in practice leaving its position as NATO's bastion against threats emanating from the east and south, Greece is now laying claim to such a role.

Greece's New Geopolitics

Broad shifts in the Eastern Mediterranean and significant domestic transformations have combined to make Greece an important geopolitical player in the region and an increasingly attractive U.S. partner. As described in our policy project's summer 2019 report, key regional shifts include the transformation of Turkey and the discovery of significant natural gas resources under the Eastern Mediterranean seabed. While these developments alone do not explain Greece's newfound role, they have in turn helped lead to a fundamental reorientation of Greek foreign policy.

Greece's Transformation

Greece's alliance with America goes back to the end of the Cold War, when the Truman Doctrine led America to provide military assistance to Greece and Turkey beginning in 1947, and to invite both to join NATO in 1952. But for decades Greece proved a difficult ally for the United States, the broader transatlantic alliance and pro-U.S. actors in the region like Israel.

Initially the right-wing military junta that ruled the country from 1967-74 was staunchly anti-communist, and thus enjoyed U.S. geopolitical support despite strong criticism by various forces in the United States of the junta's human rights violations and suspension of democracy.

More complicated was Greece's frequent divergence from American and allied priorities after the junta's fall. In the 1980s, Greece's left-wing tilt under socialist Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou inflicted considerable damage on NATO, while confronting the Reagan administration with a serious challenge of alliance management. During this period Greece leaned heavily toward the Soviet Union, due partly to strong anti-Americanism resulting from Washington's support for the junta. Papandreou, who called the United States the "expansionist Mecca of imperialism" promised to leave NATO and expel the United States from bases in Greece, and vehemently criticized NATO's deployment of nuclear missiles in Europe while saying nothing about the simultaneous Soviet nuclear buildup. He also sided with the martial law leaders and denounced the Solidarity movement in Poland.⁶

Meanwhile, Greece expanded its relationships across the Middle East, embracing its newfound role as a "third force" between East and West. This *anoigma* policy led to an opening to the Arab world, particularly with radical regimes like Syria. Greece recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) already in 1981 and had the most anti-Israel rhetoric of any European state at the time.⁷

In the late 1990s, Greece also fostered relations with the PKK, the Kurdish terrorist organization. This led to a damaging scandal in 1999 when Turkey apprehended PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan with American and Israeli assistance in Nairobi, where he had been enjoying the hospitality of the Greek Ambassador.⁸ The Kosovo conflict that same year reinforced differences between Athens and Washington. Greek popular opinion was heavily pro-Serbian, and only with great reluctance did Greece cooperate with NATO operations that evicted Serbian forces from Kosovo.⁹ There were even major anti-American protests that threatened to cancel President Clinton's visit to Greece in November 1999.¹⁰

The late 1990s also saw growing hostility between Greece and Turkey over Aegean islands and airspace, acrimony between Athens and Skopje over the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and considerable tensions on the border between Greece and Albania. Little wonder that Greece was an *enfant terrible* in EU and NATO circles at the time.

Yet despite decades of tensions with the United States and NATO, there is considerable evidence Greece is undergoing a profound and durable geopolitical transformation, suggesting America would do well to cement the relationship going forward.

Against all odds, Exhibit A in this case is the former leader of Greece's communist youth movement. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and the sharply left-wing Syriza party were elected in 2015 on the heels of the Greek economic depression, which saw a 25 percent reduction in GDP and the imposition of harsh austerity measures dictated by the EU (and, in the final analysis, by Berlin). Much like Papandreou, Syriza had campaigned on getting Greece out of NATO, an alliance it claimed had "no reason to exist."¹¹

Indeed, with their communist past and firebrand politics, Tsipras and Syriza at first sought to distance Athens from the West and seek assistance from Moscow and Beijing. Even before taking office, he met with the Russian and Chinese ambassadors and spoke out loudly against EU sanctions on Russia over Ukraine.¹² In 2016 Greece blocked an EU statement supporting an international tribunal that rejected Beijing's claims in the South China Sea; in 2017, it also blocked an EU statement criticizing China's human rights record.¹³ Longtime Western observers would have been forgiven initially for seeing his tenure as a Papandreou redux or worse.¹⁴

But Tsipras gradually evolved from firebrand to statesman. Already by summer 2015, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a story entitled "Alexis Tsipras's Remarkable Transformation," pointing to his decision to reach a deal with Greece's creditors which "cut across almost every red line that the party set when it came to power."¹⁵ Crucially, at this early stage, Tsipras decided to move from the left wing of his own party closer to the political center, enabling an arrangement with the EU and Greece's other creditors. The EU also managed to keep Greece on board with Russia sanctions, much to Moscow's chagrin.¹⁶

He also apparently heeded Greece's military leadership as the country developed a newfound interest in NATO and the bilateral relationship with the United States. Greece has welcomed a growing U.S. presence at its naval facilities at Souda Bay on Crete and opened its Larissa base to NATO unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), while also hosting NATO exercises with U.S. allies including Israel and UAE. Indeed, Tsipras presided over an unprecedented opening to Israel, with whom Greece has quickly developed considerable military and energy partnerships.

Remarkably, this transformation began under the traditionally anti-Western left flank of Greek politics with minimal overt opposition. The rank and file membership of Syriza may not be enthralled by all of Tsipras's moves, and anti-American and anti-Israel impulses persist among party membership. Still, the fact Greece's left presided over this foreign policy turnaround underscores the depth of the country's strategic reorientation. It also means the new center-right government of New Democracy can further this transformation without making foreign policy a contentious political issue. Indeed, there appears to be an unprecedented degree of consensus on foreign policy matters inside Greece.

This consensus has its limits, however. Greece hardly curtailed its ties with Russia and China under Tsipras, and is unlikely to do so under his successor, the current prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Though Tsipras in 2018 took the unprecedented step of ejecting two Russian diplomats that had allegedly fomented unrest in Greece to undermine Athens' negotiations with North Macedonia, he went to Moscow later that year seeking to restore the relationship.¹⁷ Moreover, Russia under Putin has not shied away from using connections between Russian and other Orthodox churches to further Russia's geopolitical interests in Greece. Before becoming prime minister himself, Mitsotakis traveled to Moscow where he emphasized his party "was always in the forefront for strengthening relations with Russia."¹⁸ Similarly, New Democracy in many respects authored Athens' China-friendly policy when last in power from 2004-09, including sharing Beijing's aim that Greece become an energy and trade hub between East and West.¹⁹

Looking ahead, Greece's foreign policy is likely to continue its westward shift, even as it maintains ties with Russia and China. This will be driven by two major material realities: Turkey and natural gas.

Turkey's increasingly hostile and assertive foreign policy is a powerful motivation for Greece, particularly as improving Turkey-Russia relations cause friction in Athens' own ties with Moscow. This appears unlikely to change anytime soon. Similarly, the discovery of considerable natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has led to a sharp alignment of interests among Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt to cooperate on the extraction of these resources, bringing them to market and mitigating Turkey's efforts to interfere. Tellingly, almost every regional actor except Turkey has banded together to form the East Med Gas Forum on closer energy cooperation. These discoveries have caused further differences between Greece and Russia, as Greek and Cypriot natural gas exports to the EU would undercut Russia's dominance in this market. These factors provide an important opening for the United States to cement Greece's position as a geopolitical asset; however, America should not expect that Greece's opening to China and long-standing links to Russia will disappear overnight.

The Renewed Turkish Threat

Turkish-Greek relations have been contentious since modern Greece's war of independence against the Ottoman Empire in the 1820s, including the First Balkan War (1912-13) and World War I. As the Ottoman Empire dissolved shortly thereafter, the Western allies promised Greece territorial gains in western Anatolia, prompting a bloody war when Greece's advance was repulsed by the National Movement led by Kemal Atatürk.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which ended that war, was a foundational document of the Turkish Republic, as it led to the recognition of Turkey by the major western powers and established the country's borders. It also led to a population exchange agreement for the forcible transfer of over 1.2 million Greek Orthodox inhabitants of Turkey to Greece and the migration of around 400,000 Muslims from Greece to Turkey.

Bilateral relations improved in following decades, only to be undone by disputes over Cyprus, culminating in the Turkish invasion of the island in 1974 in response to the Greek junta's attempted annexation that year. Shared NATO membership helped prevent direct military conflict, but tensions re-escalated in 1994 as the two countries nearly came to blows over

uninhabited islands in the Aegean Sea. The entry into force of the U.N. Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that year meant Greece, as a signatory, could extend its territorial waters from six to twelve nautical miles (nm), effectively making the entire Aegean into Greek territory and restricting Turkey's access to the Mediterranean. Consequently, Turkey has labeled as a *casus belli* any attempt by Greece to apply the 12 nm rule.

Tensions were ameliorated when the two countries rendered mutual assistance in the wake of earthquakes that struck western Turkey and Athens in August-September 1999. This ushered in a period of goodwill that continued when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) first came to power in 2002. From Greece's perspective, paradoxically, a more avowedly Islamist Turkey appeared preferable to the staunchly nationalist one Athens had confronted in the 1990s.²⁰ In his first term, Erdoğan actively sought to bring Turkey closer to the EU and enlisted Greece's support in this endeavor. Relations further improved after Ankara launched its so-called policy of "zero problems with neighbors." Also, in 2004, Turkey constructively supported the Annan plan for resolving the Cyprus dispute, which fell through after Greek Cypriots voted against the plan in a referendum.

Turkish-Greek tensions began to mount again as Turkey's relations with the EU soured after 2005. While the EU had started accession talks with Turkey, the failure to agree on how Turkey would treat EU member Cyprus became a key irritant in Turkey-EU relations, particularly from Athens' perspective. From this point worries began growing as Ankara raised the issue of Muslim minorities in Greece (specifically, Western Thrace) at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and initiated military cooperation with Albania and North Macedonia. Meanwhile, perennial tensions over Cyprus and the Aegean regained prominence following natural gas discoveries in Greek and Cypriot waters in 2010-11.²¹

This presented the problem of determining each country's EEZ. Turkey does not accept the standard UNCLOS method of determining such zones in which Greece's EEZ would include its Aegean islands; instead, Ankara argues that "Greek islands of the eastern Aegean lie within the continental shelf of the Turkish landmass," providing Turkey rights to resources in the waters surrounding them.²² Because most islands outside Turkey's coast belong to Greece, Turkey would have next to no EEZ under the terms of UNCLOS. Therefore, Turkey rejects the general principles according to which such zones are normally delimited, arguing that islands should not be counted when determining an EEZ.

Instead, Turkey clings to the notion it has rights over its continental shelf, which in turn overlaps with the Cypriot EEZ. These expansive claims are similar to China's in the South China Sea, which were rejected by an international court in 2016. This is the dubious basis for Turkey's drilling operations in waters generally considered to be under Cypriot jurisdiction. Meanwhile, Turkey has agreed with the leadership of the Turkish Cypriot government, which only Ankara recognizes, on an EEZ delimitation between the two parties that extends over much of Cyprus' own internationally accepted EEZ.

While the renewal of Greek-Turkish tensions has been incremental, 2015 appears to have been a turning point. Until then, Turkey's foreign policy was focused primarily on the Middle East. But that year saw a shift in Turkish domestic politics as Erdoğan had a falling out with his erstwhile informal allies from the religious community of Fethullah Gülen. Erdoğan responded by forming a tactical alliance with the very same nationalist groups he and the Gülenists marginalized and imprisoned in 2008-11.²³

Turkish domestic turmoil led the country in a much more nationalistic direction, including at Greece's expense. This was exacerbated by the downturn in Turkish-American relations over diverging interests in Syria, and by Turkish allegations of U.S. knowledge of (or collusion with) the failed July 2016 military coup against Erdoğan. Turkey's behavior vis-à-vis Greece thus returned to the pattern of the 1990s: a sharp growth in naval and aerial incidents in which Turkey violates Greek territorial waters and airspace, as well as growing tensions over Cyprus.

There are also important differences with the 1990s. Back then, Turkey and Israel were strategic partners, with Greece the odd one out. Today the tables are turned as Athens and Jerusalem draw increasingly close. Furthermore, in the 1990s, while Turkish leaders opposed Greece over the Aegean, they would not have dared challenge the Lausanne Treaty; now this is no longer the case. In September 2016, Erdoğan castigated the treaty as a defeat for Turkey, turning on its head the Kemalist rhetoric that Lausanne had been Turkey's victory over the invading European powers. At Lausanne, Erdoğan argued, Turkey "gave away" islands that were so close to the Anatolian mainland that one could shout across the narrow straits and be heard, forcing Turkey today to grapple with the uncertainty over Aegean territorial waters and airspace.²⁴

Erdoğan made a historic visit to Athens in the 2017 – the first by a Turkish president in 65 years – but far from advancing the relationship he took the opportunity to argue the Lausanne Treaty needed to be "modernized." This was met with rejection from both Tsipras and Greek President Prokypis Pavlopoulos. In 2019, the situation escalated further, as Turkey deployed drilling vessels in waters considered part of Cyprus' EEZ – a zone Turkey disputes, as noted above – leading to sharp condemnations from Athens and Brussels.

This ongoing decay of relations with Turkey has serious implications for Greece's security, as the country simply was not prepared for sharp upticks in Turkish provocations. Greece's economic depression in the past decade has prevented the country from investing more heavily in defense, even as Turkey has been busy lavishing more money on its own military. Combined with the new assertiveness of the Turkish government, this puts Greece in a very precarious position, and is compelling it to actively seek new ways of providing for its security.

Greece's Evolving Relations with the U.S. and NATO

In recent years Greece's growing sense of vulnerability to an assertive Turkey has led it to develop new security relationships. Because Turkey is also a NATO member, however, alliance membership does not protect Greece from potential Turkish aggression. Therefore, Greece explored closer ties with Russia, particularly when Turkish-Russian relations were at a low point following the Turkish downing of a Russian fighter plane along the Syrian border in November 2015. This led to unease among NATO allies, but the rapid rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow after the failed July 2016 coup against Erdoğan cooled Russia-Greek relations. Athens no longer could see Russia as a balance against Turkey, and Moscow in any case viewed Turkey as a much greater prize than Greece in terms of weakening NATO from within.²⁵

Consequently, from 2017 onward Athens went full steam ahead building closer military ties with Washington. The United States has had a naval detachment at Souda Bay on Crete since 1969 and turned it into a Naval Support Activity in 1980. Still, the anti-Western stance of socialist Greek governments in the 1980s inhibited closer military ties. It is only recently that U.S.-Greek military relations have taken off. In February 2017, eight UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters and more than 70

other pieces of equipment arrived for the 10th Combat Aviation Brigade's nine-month rotational deployment to Greece, as part of NATO's response to Russian aggression in Ukraine.²⁶

Greece has also increased military purchases from the United States, currently totaling more than \$1 billion. This includes upgrading the backbone of its air combat fleet – 85 U.S.-made F-16 warplanes – to the F-16 Viper, a \$546 million deal largely focused on electronic hardware and software upgrades as well as cockpit improvements.²⁷ Greece also obtained new helicopters to make its naval forces more interoperable with those of other NATO countries.²⁸

By October 2018, then Defense Secretary James Mattis raised publicly the prospect of increased U.S. military presence in Greece during a Pentagon meeting with his Greek counterpart Panagiotis Kammenos, who emphasized “it’s very important for Greece that the United States deploy military assets in Greece on a more permanent base, not only in Souda Bay but also in Larissa, in Volos, in Alexandroupoli.”²⁹

Since then, U.S. and Greek forces have trained together at a base near Mount Olympus and U.S. unarmed MQ-9 Reaper drones operated out of Larissa airbase. This marks the first time that intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities have been deployed to Greece, even temporarily.³⁰ The United States also deploys rotational units in Greece, including combat aircraft: some 350 U.S. troops are stationed in Volos and about 20 U.S. helicopters operate out of the nearby base in Stefanovikeio. The United States also has been using bases in Alexandroupoli and Araxos, and American and Greek officials have discussed expanding port visits and training exercises.³¹

In January 2019, U.S. and Greek forces held a combined arms live-fire exercise (CALFEX) in Greece, marking the first time U.S. aviation rotational forces trained with Greek attack aircraft and ground forces.³² In spring 2019, the United States reportedly looked into stationing KC-135 aerial refueling tankers at Larissa or replacing the MQ-9 Reapers with Global Hawk RQ-4 drones.³³ In July, head of U.S. European Command General Tod Wolters met with the Chief of the Greek General Staff, General Christos Christodoulou, to discuss a Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement (MDCA), the U.S. naval presence at Souda Bay and continued expansion of joint exercises and training.³⁴ Around the same time U.S. Ambassador to Greece Geoffrey Pyatt assessed the military relationship as “higher than it has been in decades,” and shared that the two countries were trying to update the MDCA to allow a “wider range of military missions” between the two countries.³⁵

While Greece has offered the opportunity to establish new U.S. military bases in the country, the Pentagon has not indicated interest in this, nor in establishing a large permanent force in Greece. Instead, in keeping with the past twenty years of U.S. defense policy, America has emphasized rotational presence and gaining greater access to Greek bases that can facilitate missions in the Eastern Mediterranean, Black Sea region and the Balkans.

In parallel, Greece has expanded military cooperation with NATO. For years Athens has maintained a consistent level of defense spending, and is one of the few NATO members to meet the target of two percent of annual GDP. But now it is also collaborating more closely with the alliance, and as a result contributes more to NATO's common defense than in the past.³⁶ Currently, Athens contributes primarily to NATO patrol operations in the Aegean and assists with the migration crisis from the Middle East and North Africa into Europe by helping return migrants bound for Greece back to Turkey.³⁷

Greek-Israeli Relations

As Turkey’s ties with the West have become increasingly cool over the past decade, and outright hostile to Israel, Greece and Israel have drawn closer together diplomatically and strategically. This is no small feat, given the preceding decades of fraught relations between the two countries. Indeed, Greece was the last EU country to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel, when center-right leader Konstantinos Mitsotakis, father of the current prime minister, made an official visit to Israel in 1990.

The relationship did not progress considerably after this, at least until the worsening of Turkish-Israeli relations from 2009 onward prodded a new spring between Athens and Jerusalem. That year, the two governments launched an informal initiative leading to top-level diplomatic connections. At a chance meeting in Moscow in early 2010, Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou and his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu established a strong personal rapport and started the process of boosting ties further.³⁸

Several deeper currents also promoted stronger Greek-Israeli relations.³⁹ The deterioration of Turkey’s once-close cooperation with Israel has been the main factor driving Israel and Greece together. Greece’s economic troubles are another, as Athens sought Israel’s help with EU and international institutions amid the onset of its fiscal crisis around the same time. Greece also hoped to replace Turkey as a prime destination for Israeli tourism.

Relations developed rapidly as a result, with Netanyahu visiting Greece in 2010 – the first such visit ever by an Israeli premier. In 2011, Papandreou’s government stopped an attempted flotilla to Gaza sailing from Greek ports, which threatened a repeat of the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* expedition from Turkey that triggered the nadir in Turkish-Israeli relations. Fears this improvement would end with the election of Tsipras in January 2015 were soon allayed. That same year, Greece diverged from the EU consensus by making clear it would not follow EU principles on labeling goods produced in Israeli settlements.⁴⁰ Indeed, the relationship consolidated considerably under Tsipras and is set to expand further under current prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who made his position clear in June 2019 shortly before winning the Greek election when he called the strengthening of Greek-Israeli ties his “personal commitment.”⁴¹

Greek-Israeli ties have developed most strongly in the military and energy fields. The energy relationship is in fact triangular, given the key role of Cyprus in Eastern Mediterranean energy exploration. (The United States also has a stake in these relationships, as Houston-based Noble Energy helps operate important offshore Israeli and Cypriot natural gas fields.) Already in 2010, amid the first significant natural gas finds in the region, Israel and Cyprus resolved their maritime border to facilitate offshore gas exploration.⁴² In 2012, Netanyahu became the first Israeli prime minister to visit Cyprus, and leaders of the three countries have met regularly since 2016.⁴³ By 2017, Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Israel agreed to construct the 1200-mile East Med pipeline to carry up to 16 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas annually from Israeli gas fields in the Mediterranean to Europe via Greece, though at a projected cost exceeding \$7 billion.⁴⁴ At the beginning of 2020 Greece, Cyprus and Israel signed a formal accord to build the pipeline.⁴⁵

At first, this emergent grouping did not generate attention in Washington, as the Obama Administration prioritized mending Turkish-Israeli relations. Only in December 2018, when the

three leaders met in Beersheba, Israel, did the United States send its ambassador in Israel to attend. The United States then issued a joint statement of support with the three countries when Secretary of State Michael Pompeo participated in their sixth trilateral summit in March 2019.⁴⁶

Military ties developed even faster in the meantime. The impetus came in 2009 when Turkey closed its airspace to the Israeli Air Force, depriving it of an important training ground and prompting Israel to seek alternatives. By 2014, Israel had formally appointed a military attaché in Greece. Soon thereafter, Greece and Israel signed a status of forces agreement allowing the countries to station military forces on each other's territory.⁴⁷ This cooperation is also taking on a trilateral angle. In a June 2018 joint meeting, Cypriot Defense Minister Savvas Angelides, Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Greek Defense Minister Panos Kammenos pledged deeper military ties between their countries.⁴⁸

The Greek and Israeli militaries have developed considerable interoperability and engaged in multiple joint exercises, with Greece's mountainous and insular geography offering ideal training for aerial combat. Such cooperation stems directly from Turkey's decision in 2010, in the fallout from the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla, to withdraw from any exercises organized by Israel and to veto Israeli participation in NATO exercises.⁴⁹ (Turkey only relented in 2016 following an agreement to renormalize relations with Israel.⁵⁰) Ankara's veto led Greece to replace Turkey in hosting the exercise, whose name changed from Reliant Mermaid to Noble Dina.⁵¹

Increasingly, Greece and Israel also conduct multilateral military exercises with the United States and other NATO members, and at times with Cyprus, Egypt and UAE.⁵² This includes the regular Iniohos aerial exercises with the United States, Israel and others to develop counter-air, anti-surface warfare and air defense capabilities, among others.

Looking ahead, Prime Minister Mitsotakis declared his intention to expand the Israeli partnership beyond energy and military ties, focusing on business relations and tourism – especially as Israeli visitors to Turkey have dropped in recent years.⁵³ But clearly the growth of Greek-Israeli relations is not occurring in a vacuum: it is progressing along with Greece's proactive effort to develop its strategic relationship with the United States and intensify its role in NATO.

Greece in Eastern Med Energy Development

The ongoing discovery of considerable energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, and competing claims to these resources, has raised the stakes for Greek geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean in recent years. It has also brought Greece and the United States closer, given the central role of American energy companies in discovering and exploiting these resources.

Greece has a number of energy developments of its own, dating as far back as the 1970s. These were small deposits of oil and natural gas, and the more significant quantities were not explored until 2011 when twenty offshore blocks were opened for exploitation, mainly in the Ionian Sea west of Greece and in Mediterranean waters south of Crete. These attracted the interest of large multinational corporations, including supermajors Total (France) and ExxonMobil (United States). Italy's Edison Energy has stakes in several blocks as well, and all companies operate in consortia with Greece's Hellenic Petroleum.⁵⁴ Greek analysts estimate that Western Greece and its offshore waters could contain up to 2.5 trillion cubic meters (tcm) of recoverable natural gas, requiring up to \$30 billion to explore and develop.⁵⁵ But it remains to be seen whether drilling confirms these optimistic, if expensive, expectations.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, significant quantities of natural gas already have been discovered in other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean. Egypt's massive offshore Zohr field alone has close to 1 tcm reserves and is already producing, while Israel's offshore Leviathan and Tamar together account for more than 700 bcm. Cyprus's Glaucus, Aphrodite and Calypso fields jointly hold over 500 bcm, and with exploration in its early phases, more drilling in concession blocks off Cyprus may yield further finds.

Nearly a decade ago, when Cyprus first discovered significant offshore reserves, hopes initially were raised that this natural gas bonanza would incentivize cooperation among countries in the region, and certainly Greece and Cyprus have drawn closer to Israel and Egypt as a result. Under U.S. mediation, there has also been initial progress in resolving the maritime border dispute Israel and Lebanon.⁵⁷

But energy discoveries have, if anything, exacerbated already problematic relations between Turkey on the one hand and Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt on the other. As noted above, unlike Greece and Cyprus, Turkey has refused to accept the conventional form of delimiting EEZ boundaries according to UNCLOS. Soon after Cyprus first began drilling in September 2011, Turkey already was sending ships near Cypriot installations, signing a maritime boundary agreement with the puppet regime on the northern (Turkish) half of the island and even drilling in Cypriot waters.⁵⁸ By 2018, it was blocking a drillship exploring waters off Cyprus for Italian energy company ENI. It also has acquired and deployed two drillships of its own for operations in areas considered to be part of Cyprus' EEZ.⁵⁹ The recent Turkey-Libya EEZ agreement treats Crete, other Greek islands and Cyprus as nonexistent entities, ignoring their legal rights under UNCLOS and effectively bisecting the East Med pipeline's proposed route. The agreement also indicates the ludicrous basis for Turkey's legal claims to these waters, and how these claims put it outside the general consensus among U.S. regional partners for how these boundaries should be delimited.

Turkey's moves generated condemnation from both the United States and EU. Moreover France, whose company Total is drilling offshore Cyprus, sent a frigate to participate in joint drills with the Cypriot navy and patrol the waters around Turkey's drillship.⁶⁰ With Turkey's October 2019 invasion of Syria causing Ankara's relations with the West to deteriorate further, currently there appears to be little hope for the confrontation over Eastern Mediterranean energy reserves to abate soon.

Policy Recommendations

These evolving geostrategic trends create the need and opportunity for renewed U.S. strategic focus on the Eastern Mediterranean, with its centerpiece being a stronger bilateral U.S.-Greece relationship to promote regional stability and energy security.

Bolster U.S. Support for Diplomatic “Trilaterals” Among Regional Partners

In early 2019 the United States offered its first official public endorsement of the Greece-Cyprus-Israel “trilateral” forum for cooperation on Eastern Mediterranean diplomatic, economic and security issues. All three regional partners increasingly coordinate among themselves, yet U.S. support remains largely rhetorical, even as American companies are already extracting natural gas from Israeli and Cypriot fields, and as more American companies appear set to become involved in energy exploration around Cyprus and Crete.

In comparison, exploration by French and Italian energy companies in the waters off Cyprus has brought with it enhanced French and Italian naval presences in the region, including port visits and joint naval maneuvers with Cyprus, as well as an agreement between Paris and Nicosia to expand the Cypriot naval base at Mari for larger warships.⁶¹

American policymakers must now seriously consider similarly concrete backing to encourage growing regional diplomatic and security ties that are very much in U.S. interests. This is also necessary to lend credibility to existing statements of U.S. support, and to defend the legal rights of American companies as they become more involved in energy exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Specifically, the United States should consider:

- More persistent diplomatic engagement with the Greece-Cyprus-Israel and Greece-Cyprus-Egypt trilaterals, beyond the current occasional participation by U.S. diplomats in these countries’ regular summits;
- More frequent rotational deployments of U.S. warships to the waters offshore Greece and Cyprus;
- Participation in joint military exercises among Greece, Cyprus and Israel, or at least sending observers;
- Integrating Greek naval forces with U.S. carrier groups deployed in the U.S. Sixth Fleet’s area of responsibility in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Strengthen Greece’s Ability to Help Defend U.S. Interests

In recent years Athens has made clear its willingness to assume more responsibility for Eastern Mediterranean security, including spending a greater share of GDP on defense than any other NATO member save the United States. Yet Greece’s armed forces also carry the burdensome legacy of more than a decade of austerity measures that inhibited the development or

expansion of core capabilities, chiefly air and naval forces. In tandem with efforts to provide more tangible support for trilaterals with Cyprus, Israel and Egypt, the United States should also strengthen Greece's ability to defend U.S. interests by increasing bilateral military-to-military ties.

First and foremost, this means providing foreign military financing (FMF) for Greece to purchase U.S. weapons and materiel. Such assistance would enable Athens to do what American policymakers increasingly ask of allies, namely to take on larger duties of collective defense. It also would benefit the American workforce and economy by stimulating demand for U.S. defense exports.

At the end of 2019, Congress passed legislation authorizing \$3 million in FMF for Greece for the next U.S. fiscal year. While this is a welcome increase from the current amount of zero and would effectively open an account for additional FMF for Greece in future years, this proposed level of support is insufficient given the gravity of geostrategic change underway in the Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, this would place Greece on par with Peru, but multiple orders of magnitude behind other bulwarks for U.S. interests in the region such as Israel (\$3.3 billion annually), Egypt (\$1.3 billion) and Jordan (\$425 million).⁶²

Beyond direct Greek purchases of U.S. weaponry through foreign military sales and/or direct commercial sales, greater FMF could enable Athens to address several critical shortfalls in its ability to defend freedom of navigation and energy exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. These could include, among other things:

- Completing the upgrade of the F-16 backbone of its air combat fleet to the Viper variant, to ensure 36 out of its 70 total aircraft are combat ready at any given time;
 - F-35 combat aircraft are a potential option as well, given Turkey's acquisition of advanced Russian S-400 air defenses and potentially latest-generation combat aircraft, too;
- Missile defense ships capable of deploying SM-2 interceptors with much greater range than Greece's current platforms;
 - Deploying such ships also would strengthen interoperability between the U.S. and Greek navies;
- Coastal defense and patrol capabilities like the littoral combat ship (LCS), which Greek shipyards can co-produce with U.S. companies to alleviate shipbuilding bottlenecks in the United States;
- U.S.-made UAVs like the MQ-1 and/or MQ-9.

Additionally, the United States should expand other forms of bilateral security cooperation including International Military Education and Training (IMET) and excess defense articles (EDA). Congress recently authorized steady upticks in IMET funding for Greece and Cyprus over the next three fiscal years. These increases are steps in the right direction for enhanced joint training to promote interoperability between the United States, Greece and Cyprus, as well as raising these countries' capabilities to defend against shared threats.

The United States should also expand its provision of EDA to Greece. Growing this program, which transfers weapons and materiel no longer needed by the U.S. military to partner countries at reduced price or as a grant, could enable Greece to procure everything from much-needed mundane spare parts and ammunition to aircraft engines and full ships.

In parallel, American policymakers should consider what steps might be taken to strengthen the U.S. security relationship with Cyprus, which until December 2019 was largely blocked by a U.S. arms embargo. The logical, and commendable, push by Congress to lift the embargo removed the legal roadblock to Cyprus obtaining American-made naval and air systems for deterring and defending against Turkish encroachment in internationally-recognized Cypriot waters. In theory, this could lessen Greece's security burdens and allow it focus more concertedly on its own defense, since Athens currently bears much of the unofficial responsibility for protecting Cyprus. All of this would need to be carefully considered in the context of the overall trajectory of U.S. relations with Turkey and the traditional U.S. commitment to a diplomatic solution to the ongoing dispute over Cyprus.

Bolster U.S. Military Presence in Greece

In addition to strengthening Greece's ability to support U.S. interests, the United States also should explore options to bolster its own forward military presence in Greece. This will be essential for ensuring U.S. forces can operate throughout the Eastern Mediterranean as well as the Middle East, North Africa and Balkans.

In October 2019, the two countries updated their MDCA which allows the United States to maintain and use military facilities and supporting infrastructure in Greece. Welcome changes include making the deal indefinite, as opposed to previous year-to-year arrangements, as well as providing for expanded U.S. basing facilities at Souda Bay on Crete and on mainland Greece.

American policymakers should build on this framework by exploring options to expand the U.S. military presence in Greece where possible. This could include either or both increased rotational deployments through various Greek installations and larger presences of forward-based troops. According to the U.S. Ambassador to Greece, many of these facilities are currently underutilized. One notable exception is the naval base at Souda Bay, which currently is at capacity.

Specific, but not mutually exclusive, options for bolstering U.S. presence in Greece include:

- Expanding the naval base at Souda Bay to accommodate increased U.S. port visits and other support activities, including possibly forward-deploying U.S. Navy ships;
- Establishing a new naval and airbase at the evolving energy hub of Alexandroupoli in northern Greece, to facilitate U.S. deployments and support for NATO allies in the Eastern Balkans;
- Increased U.S. Air Force deployments, training and operations for aerial refueling tankers, UAVs and possibly other platforms at the existing Larissa airbase and/or elsewhere;

- Enhanced U.S. Army training operations and deployments at Volos, and specifically for helicopters at Stefanovikeio.

Separately from these options, the United States should also view Greece and potentially Cyprus as attractive options for relocating U.S. military assets currently deployed in Turkey if that becomes necessary. Given Ankara's growing hostility to the United States, Greece and NATO more generally – including limited and inconsistent access to Incirlik Airbase for U.S. counter-ISIS operations in Syria, and threats to close the base altogether – American policymakers should consider hedging the potential loss of access by developing plans for redeploying forces out of the country, as officials have mooted recently.⁶³ Germany set a precedent in 2017 when it redeployed its forces from Incirlik to Jordan.⁶⁴

The possibility of moving U.S. forces out of Turkey offers both the prospect of generating leverage to change Ankara's behavior, and ensuring reliable access for these forces in nearby partner countries if Turkey follows through on some of its threats to deny access to the United States. Greece has indicated its willingness to host most or all these forces. The United States should therefore develop contingency plans to redeploy its forces from Turkey to Greece and/or to the British airbase at Akrotiri on Cyprus, if that becomes necessary. These forces include:

- Aerial refueling aircraft, which could redeploy permanently to Greek or British-Cypriot airbases;
- AWACS surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft;
- TPY/2 missile defense radar installation;
- B-61 tactical nuclear weapons (according to press reports); Greece used to host such weapons as recently as 2001, and it still has facilities with appropriate safeguards, though it is uncertain whether Athens would agree to host these capabilities.⁶⁵

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