

Boosting Greece's Roles as Vital Defense and Energy Ally

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This week's visit to Washington by Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis is a timely opportunity to deepen the bilateral defense partnership and strengthen Greece's role as a vital NATO and energy hub in Europe, in light of both Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Turkey's continued unreliability as an ally. The Biden administration should support projects to fast-track Greece becoming a reliable and critical EU energy distribution hub, and the Pentagon should enhance U.S. deployments through Greece in order to more effectively and rapidly project power into Eastern Europe and other nearby hotspots.

What Happened?

- On Monday May 16, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis met with President Biden to discuss Ukraine, Turkey and energy security, as part of a [two-day visit](#) during which he also will become the first Greek leader to address a joint meeting of Congress.
 - » The meeting came just days after Turkey objected to inviting Sweden and Finland to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and immediately before Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu will be in Washington to meet with Secretary of State Antony Blinken.
- On May 12, the Greek parliament [ratified](#) updates to the U.S.-Greece Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement (MDCA) that forms the basis of the growing bilateral defense partnership, including by expanding U.S. military access to Greek bases.

Why Is It Important?

- Especially in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as Turkey's continued unreliability, if not obstructionism, Greece is becoming both an increasingly vital NATO anchor on the alliance's vulnerable southeastern flank, as well as a growing energy hub for reducing Eastern Europe's heavy dependence on Russian hydrocarbons.

- Greece has proven itself a dependable partner during the Ukraine conflict, providing U.S. troops surging into the region with access to its bases as well as sending military and humanitarian supplies to Ukraine. Expanding and deepening the U.S. partnership with Greece to become the preeminent regional American security partner is vital to maintaining the stability and security of the Eastern Mediterranean, Black Sea, Balkans and beyond.
- The European Union’s (EU) [announcement](#) in March, that it intends to cut Russian natural gas imports by fully two-thirds this year on the way to achieving energy independence from Moscow “well before 2030,” means the continent urgently must find natural gas elsewhere while also rapidly developing alternative energy sources to Moscow’s oil and natural gas.
 - » The EU’s and NATO’s Balkan members are particularly dependent on Russian energy.
- Greece is a logical energy hub for Europe, given it is the nexus of several energy corridors and its consistent support – even before the Ukraine conflict – for diversifying EU energy imports and transitioning to green energy consumption; options being considered include:
 - » Floating storage regasification units (FSRU) [currently](#) being built or considered for construction in Greece, which will significantly expand Greece’s capacity to import liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the United States, North Africa and Middle East;
 - » The Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria (IGB) pipeline, currently under construction, which will [enable](#) Greece to send both imported LNG and piped Azeri natural gas (via Turkey) to Bulgaria and – if the existing Trans-Balkan Pipeline is reversed – to Romania, Moldova and even Ukraine (all of whom depend almost entirely on Russian energy);
 - » Proposed undersea “Interconnector” cables, backed by EU financing, which would [import](#) electricity from Egypt, and from Israel via Cyprus, to Greece and the EU;
 - » Proposed undersea EastMed Pipeline to deliver Israeli and/or Cypriot offshore natural gas to Greece and, via the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), Albania, Italy and the EU.
 - In January 2022, the Biden administration [ended](#) U.S. support for the EastMed Pipeline, citing environmental [concerns](#) as part of a policy [shift](#) to “promoting clean energy technologies.”
- In parallel, Greece also is becoming an increasingly crucial, reliable and active U.S. security partner and provider in Eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean, especially amid NATO’s urgent need to shore up its eastern flank – particularly in the Balkans:
 - » Even pre-Ukraine, Athens aptly helped fill the [vacuum](#) created by Turkey’s decreasing dependability as NATO’s traditional bulwark around the Black and Mediterranean seas.
 - Thanks to the updated MDCA, the U.S. military can increasingly utilize Greek bases to project power into Europe, the Middle East and North Africa;

- Though key NATO allies like Romania and Poland [announced](#) defense budget hikes in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, this still trails the 3.8 percent of GDP that Greece already devoted to defense last year, which represented the second-highest figure in NATO after the United States.
- Most recently, Greece publicly welcomed NATO accession by Finland and Sweden while Turkey originally objected to and placed [stringent](#) conditions on their membership bids;
- Meanwhile, Turkey has undermined collective security through its purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system and stymied attempts to bring natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean to European markets through its continued naval harassment of exploration and drilling vessels and refusal to recognize Greek and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). Turkish military aircraft also continue to routinely [violate](#) Greek airspace, even as its foreign minister visits Washington to press Ankara’s request to purchase 40 new F-16 fighter aircraft.
- » In March, the United States [announced](#) it would use the northern Greek port of Alexandroupoli, where the Pentagon is expanding basing facilities as per the MDCA, to surge 3,000 U.S. troops and associated equipment into Bulgaria and Romania to shore up NATO’s weak position in the Eastern Balkans and Western Black Sea.
- That same month, Athens [sent](#) weapons and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and the Greek Air Force said it would join NATO patrols over Bulgaria and Romania.
- » By April, following Turkey’s closure of the Black Sea straits, Alexandroupoli and northeastern Greece [became](#) the primary U.S. staging point for reinforcements headed to the Balkans and Poland, as well as the main air corridor for U.S. Navy and Air Force drones patrolling the Black Sea and Balkans from bases in the Mediterranean.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The Biden administration should explicitly support Greece’s key role in peaceful Eastern Mediterranean energy development as part of long-term strategic competition with Russia.
 - » This includes ending [opposition](#) to the EastMed and potentially other proposed natural gas [pipelines](#) in the region based on stated concerns about renewable energy.
 - » The administration also should support projects to fast-track Greece’s development as a critical EU energy distribution hub, including exploring ways for the United States to help expedite expanded LNG capacity and double the throughput of the IGB pipeline.
- Through existing regional frameworks like the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) and the Greek-Cypriot “trilaterals” with Israel and Egypt, the United States should actively promote cooperative energy development between the region and Europe – including by appointing a Special Envoy for the Eastern Mediterranean.

- The Pentagon should [expand](#) America’s military force posture and capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean, including by:
 - » Forward-deploying additional air wings in Greece;
 - » Redeploying at least two guided-missile destroyers (DDG) from Rota, Spain, to Greek ports to reduce transit time and enhance U.S. naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean;
 - » Deploying additional expeditionary and sealift-capable ships to Souda Bay, Greece;
 - » Expanding U.S. military deployments at underutilized Greek installations, including Larissa and Stefanovikeio, similar to ongoing U.S. efforts at Alexandroupoli;
 - » Integrating Greek naval vessels into U.S. units deployed to the U.S. Sixth Fleet;
 - » Rotating or homeporting ships in Greece that can conduct patrols or escort other vessels, such as DDGs, littoral combat ships (LCS), amphibious command ships (LCC), cruisers (CG), and dock landing ships (LSD); and
- The United States should reframe the Eastern Mediterranean for multi-theater power projection, as [outlined in a JINSA report](#), with an expanded force posture in the region that could rapidly deploy to Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Congress should:
 - » Require the Pentagon to conduct an assessment of diminished U.S. capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean and how an expansion of capabilities would benefit multi-theater power projection; and
 - » Require that the Department of Defense issue a report explaining its plan to implement the 2018 National Defense Strategy requirement for dynamic force deployment and a global operating model.
- With Ankara retaining the Russian S-400 missile defense system it purchased in 2017, the Biden administration should avoid [approving](#) the sale of F-16 and modernization kits to Turkey unless and until Ankara begins to display more cooperative behavior.