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From the Margins to Center Stage: Greece Emerges as a Pivotal State in the Eastern Mediterranean

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After almost ten years of economic crisis, and despite the serious errors and backsliding of the last three years, Greece is beginning to emerge from the economic black hole it had fallen into and to reach out with increasing confidence towards its Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean neighborhood.

This growing sense of confidence has its basis in a growing awareness of Greece's unique geopolitical advantages, which render the country an indispensable member of the European Union and of NATO in an increasingly troubled region. Greece is one of the few NATO members which spend more than 2% of GDP on defence and actively participates in a number of EU and NATO operations, including KFOR, Sea Guardian and Active Endeavor.

Greece has a long-standing political and military cooperation with the United States, which is underpinned not only by shared interests and membership of NATO, but, more importantly, by shared values and a solid democratic tradition. Meanwhile, Greece maintains its traditional understanding with Russia, which enriches Greek foreign policy without, under any circumstances, being an alternative to the country's European and Euro-atlantic alignment.

Greece has a frank and open relationship with the Arab and Muslim world, based on mutual respect and over a millenium of coexistence. In any case, Greece was never a colonial power. At the same time, Greece is rapidly expanding its cooperation in all fields with Israel. The need to strengthen ties between the two countries is now recognized by all the major political parties, across the political spectrum in Greece, giving depth and stability to this policy.

Furthermore, Greece is one of the countries of the region with the strongest and most deeply established democratic traditions, which affords it political stability and real continuity in its foreign policy. Despite all the disappointments and disillusionment of the last few years, Greece's fundamentally sound democratic

institutions have proven their resilience and have stood the test of the economic crisis and the political shock-waves it unleashed.

Greece's geographic position makes it the natural gateway to Europe from Central Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece is now beginning to transform the obvious advantages afforded by its major ports in Piraeus and Thessaloniki, but also in Alexandroupoli and Kavala for European commerce as the first ports of entry from the Suez Canal. In order to build on this initial advantage, Greece is developing the necessary high-speed rail and road links with Bulgaria, Rumania, Serbia and the other countries of the region, as well as the East-West rail links from Istanbul to Igoumenitsa, that will allow it to fully develop the potential offered by its port facilities and to establish Greece as a major commercial hub linking Europe to the rest of the world.

Greece is also the natural link for bringing the energy resources of the Eastern Mediterranean into Europe. Together with Cyprus it is the bridge that links Europe to Israel, Egypt and the other countries of the region such as Lebanon and Jordan. Cyprus and Greece offer a geopolitically stable, predictable and safe route for transferring natural gas and other resources from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe and that is why significant projects such as the Eastmed Pipeline and the electricity interconnector cables linking Greece and Cyprus to Israel and Egypt are gaining ground, despite the comparatively high cost involved.

More generally, in partnership with Cyprus, Greece needs to further develop the network of cooperation between the more stable and moderate states of the region such as Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan together with Israel. This will enhance security and create favorable conditions for economic development for the whole region. Developing a more stable and interconnected environment in the Eastern Mediterranean, linking Israel and the moderate Arab states of the region with Cyprus, Greece and Europe could also have wider consequences for peace and security in the Middle East as a whole, since this would provide Israel with greater strategic depth and security, giving it more confidence and leeway to pursue a stable and peaceful settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

At a time when the Eastern Mediterranean, including Turkey, is entering into a period of prolonged political turbulence, Greece's political stability and firm European and Euro-Atlantic orientation increase its added value as a security partner for the West. The US in particular has every reason to enhance its security cooperation with Greece - but also with Cyprus - in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the long-term Greece is the most reliable and predictable partner for the US in the region and there is serious scope for further developing cooperation between the two sides. Greater US involvement would facilitate the development of an area of stable security cooperation linking Greece, Cyprus, Egypt and Israel in a manner that would function as a security buffer for the region and for Europe.

A first step towards enhancing the partnership between Greece and the US would be to achieve a long-term cooperation agreement for the use of the Souda Bay naval facility in Crete that will allow both sides to engage in long-term planning. At the same time there is plenty of room to extend cooperation to other facilities and widen its scope to cover new areas, which will enable both sides to better tackle threats related to terrorism, narcotics and illegal human trafficking in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Developing Greece's potential both economically and from a security point of view is doubly important for the EU itself. As economic integration further develops within the Eurozone it will become increasingly apparent to European policy makers that the resources of the Greek continental shelf and the Cypriot EEZ are European resources and a valuable asset for the European Union as a whole. Furthermore, Greece is the first point of entry into the EU for a series of security threats, ranging from illegal drugs to transnational terrorist networks. This means that the EU needs to step up its support for Greece, as the external border of the Union and to invest the necessary resources for more effective border control, especially of its Eastern maritime border with Turkey. Enhancing EU presence on its external border with Turkey is the only way to ensure that events such as the refugee crisis of 2015 will not be repeated.

Greece also has an enormous and increasingly exploitable potential in the field of renewable energy production, which could rapidly see it emerging as a major exporter of electric power to its neighboring countries. In fact, its potential in the fields of wind and solar power amounts to many times its own national consumption of electricity and there is already growing investor interest in this field. What is needed is the adoption of the necessary legal framework that will open up the Greek energy market to large-scale outside investment, as well as a mobilization of the resources available from EU funds to ensure that an appropriate national and regional energy grid is set up. This is necessary for the realization of energy sharing projects between the countries of the region.

In order to realize its economic and geopolitical potential Greece needs to work hard and to implement serious structural reforms in a variety of sectors that will unlock its economy, bring in foreign investment and raise its value as a provider of stability and security in the region.

Greece also needs to regain its role as the motor for the speedy accession of the countries of the Western Balkans into the EU and NATO, thus closing a dangerous geopolitical hole in the EU's backyard. This means that it needs to take advantage of the favorable conditions that have recently arisen in the region in order to ensure that further progress is achieved. Of course the countries of the region need to make serious efforts from their point of view and ensure that they fully comply with the EU's criteria concerning human rights, good neighborly relations and rule of law.

Implementing this general policy framework will also create conditions which will ensure a more constructive attitude from Turkey on the Cyprus issue and in the Aegean. Turkey remains a security challenge for Greece and the region. It continues to violate Greek sovereignty on an almost daily basis and maintains its illegal *casus belli* threat against Greece, while at the same time continuing its military occupation of one third of the territory of the Republic of Cyprus. The refugee crisis of 2015 and the wave of political refugees that fled to Greece and Europe after the attempted coup of 2016 underline the unpredictable political and security challenges emanating from Turkey for the EU as a whole. Finding ways to ensure that Turkey adopts more responsible positions on all these issues is therefore necessary for all.

More particularly, concerning the Cyprus question, as we saw in Crans Montana, Turkey continues to view Cyprus as a military, geopolitical asset and ignores the interests and aspirations not only of the Greek Cypriots but of the Turkish Cypriots as well. The latest round of talks underlined that the Cypriot people as a whole sincerely wish to see the reunification of their homeland. Unfortunately, current developments within Turkey, in view of the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2019, would most likely lead the country in a nationalistic and uncooperative mode at least in the short-term. That is why it is necessary to restart the negotiations on the Cyprus issue as soon as possible on the basis of the 6 parameters identified in the UN. Secretary General's report, especially concerning security and guarantees. This will safeguard the progress and the convergences laboriously achieved in the latest rounds of talks and keep alive the prospect of achieving a lasting solution, which will give an enormous boost to stability in the entire region.

Greece is therefore emerging as a pivotal state for the security, stability and economic development of the Eastern Mediterranean region. It lies within our grasp to implement a policy framework, in cooperation with our partners, that will give Greece and the region a much more positive perspective in the near future. All that is needed is perseverance and strong political will, careful and creative planning, a fresh perspective and a clear understanding of the opportunities and potential Greece possesses in order to move forward.