

GREECE AND AMERICA IN THE AGE OF ERDOGAN

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(www.rieas.gr) Publication date: 20 October 2017

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It is now an almost universal admission by observers, high and low, that Turkey's relations with the West are moving south fast. After decades of feeding the myth of Turkey being the "bulwark" of Western interests in the Moslem world, the Western allies discover that Ankara is far less attuned to Western ways but fully committed to authoritarian Moslem religious politics under the sultanic Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The Turkish president-for-life is doing his best to antagonize both Europe and the United States almost daily.

Turkey's attempt to join the EU has all but fizzled out. Erdogan has [announced](#) Turkey "does not need the EU" – neither does it need the US for that matter. Erdogan continues to feed a nasty row with Germany. A number of German citizens remain imprisoned in Turkey. His agents have arrested and jailed a Turkish national working for US Embassy services in Turkey. An American pastor [languishes](#) in a Turkish jail charged with inciting terrorism. A Turkish court has [sentenced](#) a Wall Street Journal reporter to jail term *in absentia* for spreading "terrorist propaganda." And the litany of such Erdogan provocations grows by the day.

Trying to crystal-ball Erdogan's motives in fomenting such upheaval becomes irrelevant given the Turkish strongman's often bizarre, unpredictable, and haphazard behavior. In true weathervane manner, Erdogan changes moods and directions by the hour. And as Turkey's domestic and external troubles grow, so does the self-appointed sultan's taste for trashing the West and provoking even Turkey's most dedicated supporters in the Western alliance.

Enter Greece.

Greece's postwar history has been dominated by the "Greek-Turkish dispute." This is the "neutral" term, preferred by NATO and the EU, to describe Turkey's monomaniac aggressive attempt to reverse the international treaty status quo in the Aegean and claim Greek island territories as its own.

Greek governments, fearing war, have oscillated and retreated over time under pressure from Turkish no-war-no-peace aggression. NATO and the EU have done little to tame Ankara. Turkish behavior in the Aegean, including almost daily violations of Greek sovereignty by the Turkish military, has been accepted as a routine element of "disputes" that should be solved by mutual cooperation. That Turkey cares little for such diplomatic niceties has never entered the thinking of Greece's "friends and allies." And so we trudge along.

Today, however, with Turkey stepping on so many toes by its own initiative – Syria, Iraq, the EU, the Kurdish affair, bashing the US, bashing Germany, flirting with Russia and Iran – Greece might have an opening, at last, of attempting to counterbalance Turkish aggressive expansionism. This is easier said than done, however. For the longest time, Greek policymakers have chosen appeasement as their main method of "handling" Ankara. With few exceptions, Greek "experts" routinely suggest that "patience," "European solidarity," and "international law" must be the main pillars of any policy toward Turkey. That none of these elements influence Turkish actions is not addressed as an "issue" that perhaps needs a different approach.

Since the EU offers little, if any, protection to full member Greece against Turkish overt aggression, the only option with some potential of improving the Greek condition vis-à-vis Ankara is a revamped and reinforced security relationship with Washington.

The October 17 visit of Greek PM Tsipras to the White House went well, with President Trump [promising](#) continuing US help as Greece emerges from an eight-year long and devastating economic crisis. It was also announced that a Greek-US deal to modernize the Hellenic Air Force's fleet of F-16 fighters, worth an estimated \$2.4 billion, has been approved and should be put into operation in the near future.

Progress toward a redefined Greek-US relationship appears possible thanks to dramatically changing circumstances since Greece's economic collapse in 2010:

1. The post-junta anti-Americanism, underlying the practices of most of Greece's political forces, is waning—especially now that the debt crisis has proved beyond doubt that the EU option, dominated by Germany's brutal austerity obsessions, is a dead end *if* Greece wishes to move away from its disastrous past and gain much-needed development traction.
2. The present government, based on a political party with a virulent anti-American past, enjoys the positive dynamic of what can be called "The Nixon Factor:" Just like President Nixon "opened" the US to normalized relations with communist China in 1972, a Greek PM, raised as an extreme leftist, could be the catalyst of bringing Greek-US relations to a newly minted pragmatic understanding without the usual anti-American cacophonies that have dominated Greek politics after 1974.
3. Greece and the US enjoy a long, if tumultuous, defense cooperation tradition formed upon providing bases to the American military. This tradition, not to mention the well-established US operational military presence at Greece's Souda Bay naval facility in Crete, forms a perfect launch pad for expanded defense cooperation between the two countries.
4. Greece should explore initiatives to offer added facilities to the US military and discuss how best to take the next step in an improved strategic association with Washington, which would firmly establish the Greek strategic space as an integral part of global US security.

Erdogan's not so subtle totalitarian policies are a godsend to Greece. It is more than obvious that Turkey under him is steering clear from a "values" relationship with the West and irrevocably rejoins its Moslem Asiatic past. Erdogan's feverish efforts to steer Turkish society away from Western "decadence" and "immorality" is the clearest sign that modern Turkey's secular past, whose future was entrusted to the military by Kemal Ataturk after 1923, is crumbling. Islamist-nationalist propaganda is now the order of the day in Erdogan's Turkey and the suppression of free speech a common practice, driving Turkish secular intellectuals, including Turkey's [only Nobel Prize winner](#),¹ to desperation.

Erdogan won't rupture Turkey's relations with the West overnight; he is keenly aware of the serious complications any such move would cause his country's increasingly fragile economy and regional politics. Yet, it is now a given that Turkey, save a miracle event, *is steadily divorcing itself from the West and its political, legal, and cultural imperatives* which, in Erdogan's book, are unacceptable constraints upon an emergent neo-Ottoman imperial Turkey . Against this backdrop, and for once in their lives, Greek leaders should pay attention and *do what must be done*.

¹If we omit Aziz Sancar, a Turkish-born American biochemist, who was awarded the 2015 Nobel Prize in Chemistry along with Tomas Lindahl and Paul L. Modrich for their mechanistic studies of DNA repair.