

US-GREECE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

A “new beginning?”

Q&A

Tassos Symeonides
(RIEAS Academic Advisor)

Copyright: Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr)
Publication date: 3 March 2019

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS).

Last December we witnessed the inaugural US-Greece strategic dialogue meeting in Washington between Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and then Greek Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs George Katrougalos. Is this truly a new beginning?

Greek-American relations are full of “new beginnings.” Diplomatic language, irrespective of the point in time, tends to stress the positive for obvious reasons. What lies behind such statements, however, is an altogether different matter. Perceptions from Athens and Washington vary: Greece, for instance, as the vastly weaker partner, seeks an American “umbrella” against the perennial Turkish threat; the US, on the other hand, focuses on a complex global and regional security scheme in which Greece is one of *many* pivots, an important one perhaps but, still, one of many.

Similarly, this “new beginning” is deployed differently by the two partners. The Greek government addresses its domestic audience and highlights the “new beginning” as its *own* success in strengthening and upgrading the country’s status as *the* preferred US partner in the region. Washington, on the other hand, has no such priorities and limits itself to delivering reassurances in carefully crafted “positive” language, which is very similar in tone and content with the *routine* language used in talking with many other partners across the globe.

What are the core working elements of this “new beginning?”

From the US perspective, the current status in the Eastern Med rests on two key strategic pillars: energy and the Middle East mess, with Syria the obvious focus. A second-tier issue is Balkan security and Russia’s perceived accelerating efforts to “destabilize” the peninsula as part of a greater strategic plan to expand its influence ala USSR. In order to protect and strengthen these two pillars the US needs bases and defense agreements providing anchors for US security and military operations. Greece could play a role in fulfilling these US strategic targets especially in view of the developing Greece-Israel-Cyprus strategic Eastern Med partnership, which has established a new regional model of balance of power closely identified with the transatlantic alliance and US geostrategic interests.

Greece’s geographic position is a key asset to American planning and the current Greek political milieu is positive for bilateral dialogue. There is quiet satisfaction in Washington with the Tsipras administration, the original “radical left” vanguard that underwent an Ovidian transformation and morphed into an obedient servant of its former enemies, the great capitalist powers. It was indeed Tsipras who delivered the recent Prespes agreement which appears to have resolved the lingering “FYROM name issue,” a problem that both the EU and the US had long considered a major nuisance associated with Balkan “stability” and NATO’s southeastern wing.

With the former “radical” leftists expected to lose the approaching general election, the next Greek administration should focus on two main targets: upgrading US defense presence in Greece and seeking stronger permanent bilateral cooperation in the energy sector. The defense objective could include a revised accord affecting the US Naval Support Facility at Souda Bay in Crete; the lease agreement of this facility is renewed annually but Washington would prefer a longer-term arrangement that will allow a substantive expansion of station activities. Concerning energy, Athens should aim at specific agreements securing US cooperation in both exploration and pipeline policies within the framework of the East Med developing partnership.

Dealing with the substance of the Prespes agreement will be more complicated. The Greek main opposition New Democracy (ND) party, which is expected to win the next election, has refused to endorse the pact in view of overwhelming popular opposition to the use of the name “Macedonia” by the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia now christened “Republic of North Macedonia.”

Inevitably, ND will come face to face with the need of a Prespes compromise to satisfy Greece's allies but at significant domestic political cost. The way the agreement was ratified by Tsipras was an unprecedented parliamentary coup that put to shame even the questionable Greek democratic standard. The accord has been described as [inherently destabilizing](#) at the national level as it is the product of bending democratic rules and ignoring "political realities and popular sensibilities."

During a recent event in Athens, the US ambassador to Greece delivered a highly optimistic speech stressing US-Greek cooperation and foreseeing better days to come. Was there anything in those remarks that struck a truly new element in Greek-US relations, particularly in the sphere of security and regional stability?

Ambassadors in general follow a script decided upon at much higher levels. Ambassador Pyatt's [remarks](#) were well within the State Department's current Greek narrative in both tenor and substance. Indeed, the six specific areas¹ he placed at the core of this Greece-US "new beginning" have been, more or less, present in all recent "re-starts" of US-Greek relations. The remarks were optimistic and, even, effusive in their repetition of how well relations between the two countries are and how they are expected to make positive strides in the near future. The Ambassador's [remarks](#) at the Delphi Economic Forum followed a similar script stressing that relations between Greece and the United States "...is as crucial as ever to our collective prosperity."

On a more practical (and hypothetical) level, it would have been a major, and indeed unprecedented, departure for the Ambassador to have touched upon specifics like e.g. Turkish belligerence and threats of war in the Aegean and expressed even circumferential support for Greece in this matter. Similarly, it would have been equally surprising and unexpected if he were to touch upon the overwhelming popular opposition to the Prespes agreement and its effect on Greek decision-making and domestic politics. The US side is well aware of these Greek concerns but unsurprisingly avoids focused commitments lest future developments dictate policy "adjustments" that could dilute the "new beginning" in more ways than one. Thus, the ambassadorial remarks did not include any "truly new elements" but, rather, conformed to the current preferred State Department narrative as [expressed](#) in the publicly available Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) for Greece.

¹ Regional cooperation, defense and security, law enforcement and counter terrorism, trade and investment, energy, and people-to-people ties.

Overall, and against all of the above, what applied positives could we expect from yet another “new beginning” in Greece-US strategic relations?

An old Greek proverb says: “When you hear of many cherries, hold a small basket,” in other words do not get overexcited over what appears disproportionately promising but, rather, choose to be cautious. When you strip away all the reassuring language from *any* “new beginning” Greece still faces ***two severe strategic threats*** that remain practically unanswered by “collective security” supposedly provided by the European (dis)Union and NATO, i.e. the United States: *the rapidly growing Turkish belligerence, territorial claims, and threats of war and the steadily growing menace of illegal immigration.*

The travesty of NATO “ally” Turkey openly bullying Greece at every opportunity is so blatant as to require little elaboration. Turkey’s presence inside the Western alliance has become an unfettered destabilizing scandal. Yet, the alliance is reluctant to chastise this “bulwark” of Western defense whose dangerous realignment with Russia and Iran, and her disruptive intrusions into Syria, pass unanswered by a confused and divided Europe and President Trump’s idiosyncratic and oscillating approach to both friend and foe. As for illegal immigration, Greece is the most unfortunate victim of both geography and the inept and downright perilous European policies toward “irregular migration” being pushed by various “humanitarian” subversive interests.

To put it bluntly, a true “new beginning” would have been one providing a credible stated reassurance, not to say active support, vis-à-vis the growing Turkish threat. Firm security US guarantees *outside* the now frail and ineffective NATO framework would be an ideal solution but, under current circumstances, there is little, if any, hope of that. Thus, the only avenue open to Athens is to handle US-Greece security relations in such manner as to make any disruption by Turkish military adventurism in the Aegean ***unacceptable*** to US regional strategic interests.

However, judging from traditional Greek behavior on issues of such capital significance, the probability of a unified and determined Greek diplomatic scheme aiming at the above target appears weak. Greek decision-makers are almost always their own and Greece’s worst enemies thanks to unbridgeable divisions and political squabbles not to mention the ever-present fear of the personal “political cost.” It is the rare Greek politician who would put the national interest *above and beyond the narrow domestic interests of the political party to which he belongs.*

True “new beginnings,” therefore, are tough to realize and even tougher to maintain in the long run. As a result, Greece should be happy with settling at the lowest common denominator and hope for incremental improvements as the strategic situation twists and turns in a world of unprecedented uncertainty.