

Greece: NATO's Southern Pillar

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Introduction

This paper aims to highlight the importance of Greece as a member of NATO and the European Union. The geography of Greece is vital to its importance in both NATO and the European Union as Greece connects Europe to the Middle East, and Africa through the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas. Political history, violence, and land disputes have deep divisions within the region. This paper will highlight the important political and strategic landscape of not only Greece but also its neighboring countries so that Greek importance in NATO can be clearly understood.

The History of Greece

To fully understand the importance of Greece as a NATO member, we must first understand its modern history since 1821. Greece has seen many wars, occupations, and crises since its revolution in 1821 against the Ottoman Empire. Greece has fought in the Balkan Wars, World War 1, and the Greek-Turkish War. The Balkan Wars of the early 20th century are incredibly

important for the current geopolitical landscape as this is the war that led to Greece gaining much of its modern territory against the Ottomans and other Balkan nations. These wars laid the foundation for much of the conflict that we saw in the mid-20th century and conflicts that we see today.

The First World War once again forced the Balkan nations to fight against one another and once again saw Bulgarian and Greek forces fight against one another for territory. It is important to understand the Greek monarchy's unfortunate situation as King Constantine I of Greece was married to the German Emperor's sister, Sophia of Prussia. This situation would lead to Constantine's abdication and would be replaced with his son King Alexander who would eventually choose to fight alongside the Allies against the central powers. By the end of the First World War, Greek forces would eventually occupy the Turkish city of Smyrna in 1919. This occupation would eventually set the stage for the next war between the two neighboring countries.

The war between Greece and Turkey from 1919-1923 would see immense destruction, death, and revenge. The Turks defeated Greek forces in a brutal fashion that led to the formation of the country that we now call Turkey. The Greek-Turkish war to this day still has profound impacts on Greek-Turkish relations. According to Christopher Kinley, "With the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, 1.5 million Orthodox Christians and 500,000 Muslims were forced to leave their homes. This population exchange put tremendous financial pressure on an already destabilized Greece, as the country had to care for 1.5 million new refugees." This war has lasting effects that are seen in much of modern Greece both physically and mentally.

Civil War: 1946-1949

In the Second World War, Greece was invaded by the Italians, and Germans resulting in over 400,000 military and civilian deaths combined. It should be noted that Greece's resistance to the Axis forces postponed Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. This delay caused a major blow to Nazi forces as time could not be replaced. By 1944 the Soviets had forced German and Axis forces to evacuate Greece. With the Axis retreat, internal strife among the Greek population

erupted. Political violence swept the nation and a civil war ensued. From 1946 until 1949 Greek communists worked tirelessly to gain control of Greece.

After many years of occupation, violence, and civil war the Greeks had finally defeated their last enemy of the blood-soaked decade. The communists had been defeated and long-sought peace had finally come to Greece. Instead of following the Western trend of disarmament, Greece was one of the only Western nations to maintain a fully combat-ready military. By 1952, Greece maintained 12 combat-ready divisions prepared for action against any foe that would challenge them. This ultimately caught the attention of a particularly powerful alliance to the North-West.

NATO Membership 1952-1974

The onset of the Cold War put Greece in a precarious situation. Greece's northern neighbors Yugoslavia and Bulgaria both laid claims on Greek territory that risked an unnecessary violent confrontation. Although Greece, Turkey, and Yugoslavia signed the Balkan Pact, it would eventually fail as the Soviet sphere of influence would creep back into Yugoslavia. Many Greek leaders including King Paul I, saw the security guarantees of NATO membership as crucial to the nation's survival.

Greece officially joined NATO on February 18th, 1952, coincidentally the same day that Turkey joined NATO. "From NATO's perspective, their membership was a huge strategic asset allowing NATO involvement in south-eastern Europe, as well as the entire Mediterranean and the Black Sea." NATO viewed Greece and Turkey as strategic allies that could extend the southern wall protecting Europe against the Soviet Union. Greece was also seen as a way to help contain the Soviet Black Sea fleet in its area.

Over the 20th century, Greece faced many challenges, but none were quite as complex as the Cyprus Crises. On July 15th, 1974, the Cyprus government was subjected to a coup d'état led by the Greek military. Up until that point, Cyprus was split between Greece, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Once the Greek uprising took place, Turkey used the chaotic environment as a pretext to invade the small island nation. Turkish warships, fighter jets, paratroopers, and tanks launched

head-on against Greek forces on the island of Cyprus. “Turkey invaded Cyprus, violating all rules of international law, including the Charter of the United Nations. The illegal Turkish invasion was carried out in two phases” (Republic of Cyprus, 2023).

For the first time in history, two member states of NATO were fighting against one another with modern fighting capabilities. The resulting clashes split Cyprus into two controlled regions of the island. The eastern region would remain the sovereign state of Cyprus, and the other part of the island would be controlled by Turkish forces. This division of Cyprus still haunts the Greek population as Turkey’s aggressive behavior increases.

An excerpt of Resolution 353 reads, “A security zone of sizes to be determined by representatives of Greece Turkey, and the United Kingdom in consultation with UNFICYP should be established at the limit of the areas occupied by the Turkish armed forces at the time specified in paragraph two above. This zone should be entered by no forces other than UNFICYP, which should supervise the prohibition of entry.” The subsequent invasion would ultimately lead to yet another government collapsing in Greece. Shortly thereafter the fall of the Greek military junta, Greece became a democratic body of governance that looked, felt, and acted more like a member of the West than just a member of NATO.

Modern Day Greece

Now that we have a brief understanding of the importance of Greece’s geographical positioning, land disputes, and former wars, we can then begin to explore the extreme importance of Greece as a NATO ally at the current time. *The military capabilities of the Greek Armed Forces are very competitive with many nations around the globe.* Although Greece is a nation of only 10 million people, its choices and partnerships have profound effects that are felt across the world. NATO’s General Secretary had this to say about Greece, “For several years, Greece has been on the front line of the refugee and migrant crisis. He reassured Greece of NATO’s solidarity and thanked Athens for its efforts to cut the lines of human smuggling. The Secretary-General also commended Greece for investing 2% of GDP in defense and its commitment to collective

security.” *Now with the War in Ukraine, the importance of Greece has become even more evident.*

Greek Armed Forces

Navy

The Hellenic Navy employs 30,000 servicemen and boasts some 120 modern warships that patrol all 500 Greek islands and conduct other missions in accordance with the NATO mission. The main mission of the Hellenic Navy is to protect Greek and allied naval sea lanes against any aggressor. These aggressors can be Russian warships and submarines, Turkish naval vessels, drug trafficking, and most frequently, illegal migrant boats. ***The Greek Coast Guard works hand in hand with the Hellenic Navy to protect and maintain the security of all 500 Greek islands.*** The Coast Guard works to interdict drug and human trafficking along its vast coastline. The Hellenic Navy maintains constant readiness to enforce international maritime law against all threats in the Mediterranean Aegean seas. Most importantly the Hellenic Navy protects the vital port of Alexandroupoli.

Air Force

The Hellenic Air Force is arguably the most dominant air force out of all the Balkan nations. Greece maintains 374 aircraft fit for service according to the World Directory of Modern Military Aircraft. Of those aircraft, fifty percent are fighter aircraft. These fighter jets include the highly versatile F-16C, F-4E, and the French Rafale F-3. It is noteworthy to mention that the Greek government is in the process of obtaining the American F-35 to replace its older aircraft.

The role of the Hellenic Air-force within NATO is to police the airspace of Montenegro and Albania. The Hellenic Air Force closely cooperates with the Italian Air Force, as both Allies keep fighter jets ready 24/7 for the mission. In the near future according to NATO’s official website, “the Hellenic Air Force will also contribute to the North Macedonia’s Air Policing with NATO Quick Reaction Alert fighter aircraft.” The Hellenic Air Force trains constantly with allied countries to maintain a high readiness in case of conflict. Most recently, Greece operated in Germany during Exercise Air Defender 23. Because of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, many NATO countries including Greece have been motivated to modernize, train, and prepare for conflict.

Army

The Hellenic Army is comprised of both professional and conscripted soldiers. The army is comprised of roughly 130,000 soldiers. Many of these soldiers are in support roles with the actual fighting force being much smaller. The capability of the Greek Army is questionable as much of its equipment varies from many different countries and standards. Most of the Greek Army's relatively modern equipment is used yet reliable American equipment. The role of the Hellenic Army within NATO is to protect its border and maintain a force ready to assist allied partners. The Greek Army trains with NATO countries in many exercises around the world. Greece heroically answered the call during the War in Afghanistan and sent soldiers to assist and support the mission of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

The Greek special forces operators are world class. In 2021, the Greek special forces command received NATO's highest readiness qualification. Although special operations are often kept away from the public spotlight, the Greek special forces are modeled after the British SAS commandos. According to Business Insider, Greece's Special Paratroopers Section frequently trains with American Green Berets from the 10th Special Forces Group. They train as well with the Navy SEALs from SEAL Team 5, Navy Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewmen from Special Boat Team 20, and Air Commandos from the 321st Special Tactics Squadron. Greek Special Operators have earned a great deal of respect around the globe. They are trained at the highest level and can strike anywhere around the globe at a moment's notice.

Geography

The geography of Greece requires Greece to maintain both its Navy and Air Force as the country is located next to Africa and the Middle East. Both the Air Force and Navy intercept Turkish warplanes and warships at uncomfortable rates. It was reported by Tasos Kokkinidis of the Greek Reporter that Turkey violated the airspace of Greece more than 10,000 times in the first eleven months of 2022. Kokkinidis stated that the Hellenic National Defense General Staff confirmed this information.

These unprecedented air violations come at the same time that Russian warplanes violate Bulgarian and Romanian airspace. The combination of these violations put high pressure on the Balkan countries that strain their air capabilities to the maximum. ***With the upcoming shipment of F-35 jets, Greece will be able to display air dominance that could greatly reduce air violations in the Southern Balkans.***

Although Turkey is officially a member of NATO, Turkey has acted aggressively against Greece in recent years. In 2022 Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan accused Greece of occupying demilitarized islands in the Aegean and said Turkey was ready to “do what is necessary” when the time came. The protection of Greek islands is vital to NATO supply lines and the European Union's sphere of influence. It is also noteworthy to mention that Israeli supply lines are also protected by Greece as both countries are partners in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

As of 7/12/2023, Greece and Turkey pledge to 'reset' ties and bypass longstanding disputes. This very recent dialogue could reshape the political landscape, or it could be a ploy by the newly elected government in Greece to buy time as Turkey inches closer to ties with Russia. Since the 1970's geography and land disputes have shaken the two so-called allies to the brink of conflict on several occasions. As both nations rearm with modern weaponry from the United States, a conflict between Greece and Turkey has the potential to upend the NATO alliance to a degree that has never been seen before. Turkey recently yet unsuccessfully blackmailed Sweden from joining the NATO alliance in a bid to receive F-16 aircraft from the United States. It is already known to the public that Turkey blackmails the European Union with illegal migrants. Greek geography could unfortunately put them at the front of a political confrontation with NATO's partner (Turkey).

Port of Alexandroupoli

The Hellenic Naval protection of the port of Alexandroupoli is vital to the war effort in Ukraine. Although Turkey is a member of NATO, President Erdogan has blackmailed both Russian and NATO access to the Black Sea. NATO has bypassed Turkish interference by using the port of Alexandroupoli as a NATO supply hub for weapons, men, and material. From Alexandroupoli, NATO can efficiently supply its eastern allies by train and road extending from Greece all the way north to Finland. Much of the highly sought Western weaponry in Ukraine has traveled from the port of Alexandroupoli to Odessa where it can then be distributed along the eastern front for military action against the forces of the Russian Federation.

The efficiency of the small nation of Greece in supplying transportation networks should come as no surprise to those who know Greek history. According to the New York Times, “The occupation of Ukrainian lands has struck a chord among Greeks, many of whom see parallels between the imperial rhetoric of President Vladimir V. Putin and the territorial claims of Turkey, whose predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, ruled Greece for centuries.” ***In this aspect, Greece has proven itself to be a reliable member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.***

The importance of other Greek ports cannot be understated. “Greek ports are strategically located and could easily be transformed into regional logistics hubs for goods travel from Asia to the European Community,” according to Enterprise Greece. Unfortunately, China has become very influential in Greek trade. China is the majority owner of the Piraeus Port in the capital city of Greece. Chinese investors took advantage of Greece during economic turmoil and now have a foothold in the NATO country. This influence could have interesting effects if war is to break out in Taiwan as Greece could have to make some very difficult decisions.

The Migration Issue

Greece is currently at the forefront of an undeclared war that has the potential to bring all of Europe to its knees. Millions of refugees from Africa and the Middle East travel through Greece every year with the intention to travel deep into the heartland of Europe. The European Union has failed to create a plan to stop this mass migration in a meaningful way and has left not only Greece but NATO to fix its problems. *The failure of the European Union to react to this issue has several consequences that will negatively affect the continent of Europe in the coming years.*

The extremely dangerous voyage from Africa to Greece by boat claims thousands of lives every year. Greece is forced to use naval and coast guard assets to rescue stranded migrants who are in life-threatening danger. The repositioning of Greek assets in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas forces Greece to allocate resources away from the NATO mission. *Turkey has even weaponized migration to hinder Greek forces and their missions.* It should be noted that Turkey sent migrants to Belarus so that Lukashenko could probe and preoccupy Polish forces in the same manner.

There has yet to be a sufficient reaction to this weaponization of migrants on an official level. However, the underlying effects of Turkish actions and illegal migration from Africa have persuaded many residents within the European Union to support right-wing ideology.

If the European Union cannot find a solution to the migration issue, it would be fair to assume that we are entering dangerous times.

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