

Greece-France Defense Deal and Its Impact

Raagini Sharma

(RIEAS Senior Analyst, and Research Director, Indic Researchers Forum)

Copyright: @ 2021 Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr)

Publication date: 24 October 2021

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

Strategic Defense Cooperation Pact between Greece & France

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and French President Emmanuel Macron inked the new defense deal at The Elysee Palace in Paris, France on September 28, 2021. This defense deal that includes an order for three French Belharra Frigates and three Gowind 2500 Corvettes for Hellenic Navy worth about 5 billion euros along with the order of 18 Dassault-made Rafale fighter aircraft last year has added fuel to the fire to the already strained relationship between Greece and Turkey. Greece has also asked for six more of Dassault Fighter aircraft providing additional boost to its weapon modernization programme. The new defense deal between the two NATO allies has enraged Turkey as it would enhance the naval capability of Greece in blue waters and for the USA & NATO, it has certainly raised hackles for diluting the mandate of NATO alliance and not conforming to its clauses.

Hard on the heels of the defense deal signed last month, the Greek lawmakers ratified a new defense agreement with France on October 07, 2021 over the establishment of a strategic partnership for cooperation in defense and security that would allow Greece and France to come to each other's aid in the event of an external threat. The strategic and military alliance between the two countries has caused much furore in the political landscape of Mediterranean and Aegean Sea by escalating the tensions between Greece and Turkey as also stirring the tensions in the East Mediterranean waters over the energy exploration rights and thus impacting its geo-political dynamics. The European political dynamics and the matrix has also been shaken as the French President has quoted the emerging military alliance between France and Greece as the initial step for the greater strategic autonomy of EU, thus taking the action of defying NATO. This sole agreement may further triggers the dissent within NATO over the subject. For Turkey, the military alliance may well be the *casus belli* in the Aegean Sea and Mediterranean between Turkey and Greece.

Attention is particularly drawn to a specific mutual assistance clause within the ambit of this deal that conveys that the two sides will come to each other's aid with all appropriate means at their disposal, and if necessary, with the use of armed force if they jointly ascertain that an armed attack is taking place against the territory of one of the two. In the words of French President Macron, for the first time, an explicit and unequivocal military assistance clause is provided in case of a third party attack on any of the states.

With the defense pact in place, both the countries will be able to mutually support each other, carry out joint actions at all levels, use each other's sea ports and airports, launch common expeditionary forces and align themselves on the matters of foreign policies, migration, terrorism, energy and maritime security in the Middle East.

What does the defense deal mean to Greece?

Greece that had been fighting with the financial recession since 2008 and almost reduced the defense expenditure to half, has taken a long leap forward with inking of the defense deal with France. First and foremost, Greece has shown its assertiveness in enhancing the expenditure on defense; second, it has displayed its will to equip itself with state-of-the-art warships to upgrade its sea power taking note of its apprehension of lack of naval capability in blue waters, particularly in Mediterranean and Aegean Sea and lastly, it has taken the assurance of one of the best military in EU to come to its aid in case of eventualities. France stood by Greece in the summers of 2020 when Greece had a standoff with armed forces of Turkey to safeguard its maritime and energy rights. France deployed its naval forces to beef up the military power of Greece and thus showed its solidarity.

With three Frigates and Corvettes each, Greece maritime forces will be capable of a surveillance of vast seas stretching from northern tip of Aegean Sea to as far south in the Mediterranean sea. And with 18 Rafale fighters (being increased to 24), the capability for air space protection and domination will greatly enhance. The three Frigates will be delivered by 2026, with the first Frigate to be delivered by 2024. Naval Group of France and Lockheed Martin, had a tough competition to clinch the deal.

As per Greece political corridors, its strategic partnership with France will not impact the Greece - US relations. The defense deal will be non-antagonistic to Greece's relations with the USA. The extension of five years of the *Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement between USA and Greece* recently in the wake of defense deals between Greece and France showcases the intention of continued presence of US troops in Greece primarily in key NATO base at Souda Bay.

With this huge drive towards modernization of its navy and airforce, Greece would be much more capable of warding off threats to its territorial and maritime integrity, counter the challenges of Turkey on the issues of disputed islands in Aegean Sea, ensure its interests over energy rights while doing maritime survey and exploration of hydrocarbon reserves in East Mediterranean Sea and provide assistance to the French forces in Sahel, in Africa.

How Does France See it?

President Macron has been long insisting that Europe needs to develop its own defense capabilities and no longer be reliant on USA. However, clinching the defense deal of Frigates & Corvettes and inking the strategic defense cooperation pact with Greece has come at an opportune moment when France has had a diplomatic defeat in the hands of AUKUS, a new trilateral security alliance between Australia, United Kingdom and USA for the Indo-pacific region, wherein Australia reneged \$ 66 Bn deal to buy French Submarines, and is now buying it from USA. The deal with Greece has helped France saving the disgrace caused by AUKUS. At the same time, inking of this pact has given a much needed voice for the strategic autonomy to EU. As per Macron, it is the audacious first step towards European strategic autonomy. He further adds that the Europe must stop being naive which is a loaded statement. The vision of European strategic autonomy includes technological independence, combat readiness and combined European defense without being reliant on the USA.

French officials have stressed the deal did not target Turkey and that it was fully in line with NATO. "This is not an agreement that is directed against Turkey or anyone else, it is an agreement that is in line with our common goal, Greece and France, to strengthen European sovereignty, including in the Eastern Mediterranean, where we have crucial interests," a French presidential official told reporters in a briefing on Sept. 28. "So, we would not understand if Turkey overreacts to an agreement that is not directed against them," he said.

France indeed gains from the strategic cooperation pact with Greece, first, it gets the image makeover from the diplomatic face loss caused by AUKUS security pact in Indo-pacific region; second, its defense manufacturing industry gets the much needed boost; third, it may make the inroads in selling its armaments to the other nations of EU particularly the East European countries if they tend to buy defense equipment from France than the USA; fourth, last but not the least, if France continues spearheading the pack of nations wanting strategic autonomy to EU, it may lead to France gaining geo-political mileage in the longer run in the ever changing international political dynamics.

Turkey's Reaction to The Pact

It has come as no surprise that the Athens-Paris pact has hugely angered Ankara. Turkish Foreign ministry has quoted that Greece's policy of armament as well as isolation and alienation of Turkey, instead of cooperation, is a problematic policy, which will threaten regional peace and stability and undermine not only itself but also the EU, which Greece is a member of.

Ironically, France, Greece and Turkey all are NATO members. Hence, for Turkey, the intra-NATO pact between Paris and Athens is not justified. In one of the statement from officials of Turkey, it has been quoted that Greece's maximalist maritime jurisdiction area and national airspace claims were in contravention of international law and that it would strengthen Turkey's determination to protect its rights in the region.

For Turkey, the procurement of Frigates, Corvettes and Rafale fighter aircraft will tremendously enhance the military capability of Greece to defend its maritime and territorial integrity as also project and deploy its forces at longer reaches. Turkey's claims over exploration rights of gas and oil reserves in Aegean Sea and East Mediterranean will be vociferously refuted and challenged by Greece. Turkey, for sure, has the apprehension that with strategic cooperation from France and acquisition of warships and warplanes, the military favour is likely to be tilted towards Greece.

NATO & Europe's Strategic Autonomy

The seed of NATO was sown and germinated on the idea of collective defense. For NATO, it remains the cornerstone for the security of Europe and North America. Article 5 of the NATO clause specifies that an attack on one member is considered an attack on all. Hence, its Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg has been critical of the defense initiatives undertaken by its two members as he has conveyed that within the NATO framework, the mutual assistance clause between France and Greece is a duplication and an assertion from both the countries to defy NATO.

Greece has been critical of NATO's neutral stance in its dispute with Turkey last year. France has been apprehensive of US forcing its way on the Eastern European nations to buy its armaments and NATO's overarching goals and objectives in Europe.

For long, there have been murmurs, now the clamouring by France for greater European autonomy and with inking of this deal, the France President has overtly conveyed the idea of Europe's strategic autonomy in concept, vision, roadmap and implementation. This defense deal has been cited as the first steps towards achieving strategic autonomy for Europe.

Impact of the defence deal and the strategic pact

Relations between Greece and Turkey have long been strained over territorial and continental shelf issues in the Eastern Mediterranean, air space, energy, the status of some Aegean islands, and the ethnically-split island of Cyprus. Turkey is wary of the strategic importance of archipelago of islands close to the borders of its mainland that Greece holds today. With Frigates, Corvettes and Rafale fighters, the reach of Hellenic navy and airforce will tremendously enhance. The defense deal will bolster the confidence of Greece and contribute towards its deterrence against the escalating armaments and militarization of Turkey as also ensure its territorial integrity and safeguard its maritime claims. Better equipped Navy and Army will bolden exploration rights and energy claims of Greece within the international legal framework of deep waters on the subject. For Turkey, the defense deal is a setback but it will continue to militarily modernize itself, keep issue of intra-NATO alliance alive and its illegality in EU and regionally, fight for its energy rights and claim for better pie in East Mediterranean exploration.

In my opinion, the major impact of the defense deal and the strategic military pact between Greece and France, apart from bringing in military parity between Greece and Turkey with an edge to Greece, would be on the NATO's EU pillar, the foundation of which has been shaken due to the perspectives of strategic autonomy and sovereignty to EU and non-reliance on USA. This perspective becomes more relevant when the geo-political dynamics has taken a shift and for US and AUKUS, the centre of gravity and focus has shifted to Indo-pacific region.