

GREECE AND THE BALKANS: RE-CONCEPTUALIZATION NEEDED

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The debt crisis has deeply affected Greece's sovereign abilities and has multiplied the difficulties in plotting for the future in ways that could offer an acceptable degree of confidence. As a result, dealing with the Balkan shifting sands becomes a thorny problem. Greece, however, can ill afford to let her guard down concerning developments in the region, which unfortunately constitutes her immediate strategic "depth." As Athens struggles under the rain of blows from the lenders and the hated troika (now euphemistically known as 'the institutions'), the international free-for-all surrounding her isn't taking a break. Only too recently, for example, neighboring FYROM (or 'Macedonia') came under renewed attack in the form of a Great Albania irredentist spasm with the reappearance of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) thugs, who caused mayhem in the northern town of Kumanovo and other FYROM locations. By all counts, the risk of re-ignition in Greece's immediate periphery is again a major threat.

Is Greece ready for the challenge?

An immediate (honest) answer would be "very little." Foreign policy concerns during the last several years have fallen by the wayside as the European Union mounted its all-out attack by "bailout" upon bankrupt Greece. Not so though for Greece's immediate neighbors. Last month, the Albanian prime minister, Edi Rama, [announced](#) matter-of-factly that Albania and Kosovo will inevitably unite "inside the EU or not." This rather flagrant call to what many see as terrorist arms hasn't gone unnoticed, especially in Serbia. Greece, on her part, was uncomfortably silent past routine diplomatic buzz.

Greek diplomacy has traditionally found difficult to strike common ground with Greece's neighbors due to a long history of violence and bloodshed dating back to the early 20th century and even before. Traditional good relations with former Yugoslavia collapsed along with the disintegration of that country, with Greece coming under tremendous pressure to

join a Western anti-Serbian coalition for the attack of the "humanitarian bombers" upon the Milošević government. Albania has been a problematic next door neighbor for the longest time; and Bulgaria, although now on its best behavior, won't presumably miss a good opportunity to further its own interests at the expense of an old enemy (during World War Two, Bulgaria occupied part of Greek Macedonia with frightful consequences in innocent blood and treasure). As for FYROM, no comment is necessary.

Under the circumstances, can Greece organize her Balkan relations in a meaningful, productive manner suited to a dangerously fluid regional environment? And can she put herself at the forefront of multilateral initiatives aimed to balance out the clashing interests of the Western coalition and Russia in the Balkans?

Greece needs to meet two fundamental requirements before any attempt to play seriously in the regional too-and-fro can be initiated. First, she needs to recover a degree of (semi) independent action at levels approaching the pre-2010 era. Second, she needs to work out a longer term strategic assessment of national aims and interests in the Balkan region. The former requirement appears close to impossible under the present hammering Greece is suffering in the hands of her European "partners." The latter requirement depends largely upon domestic political stability and the capacity of the SYRIZA government to move fast in defining external policy strategic objectives. Under the current circumstances, achieving such definitions may be also very close to impossible: SYRIZA is wracked by in-party dissension and has next to nonexistent experience in handling foreign relations (a topic in which, to be fair, many governments before it tried and, more or less, failed).

Whatever SYRIZA attempts to do, or thinks it can do, a *re-conceptualization of the Balkan environment must come first and foremost*. Lots of water has flowed under the bridge since the Yugoslavian crisis and yet another fragmentation of the region, in true "Balkanized" fashion, that was completed via outside intervention.

The threat of outside interference remains very much alive and, indeed, delimitates the diplomatic space in which Balkan countries may maneuver. NATO expansion in the region continues to invite Russian dissatisfaction, to put it mildly, not to mention Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo, which also remains in Russia's quiet sights. And the "coincidence" of the sudden reappearance of the KLA gunmen in FYROM, just as Moscow delivered energy guarantees to the SYRIZA government (politically an outcast 'Trojan Horse' in 'united' Europe and subject to open attempts from Brussels and Berlin to make it 'go away'), should make Athens sound the alarm.

Can SYRIZA deliver? Right now, anybody's guess is as good as ours. And this is hardly encouraging.

