

The Security Dimensions of the Greek Crisis

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Relative to its population, Athens maintains the largest standing army in Europe and has one of the highest defence budgets in NATO. Why, then, doesn't the Greek government just cut defence spending to reduce the country's debts and borrowing, especially given that the current situation in the region involves a wide range of humanitarian issues rather than a concrete military threat? What should be the assessment of the security policy environment surrounding the Greek crisis?

A left-wing party gains power in Athens and has to save money. At first glance, reducing the defence budget (rather than the pension pot) seems like an obvious part of the solution to Greece's financial problems. After all, Greece has more military personnel per capita than any other country in Europe, and its bailout referendum on 5 July 2015, failed not just because of planned pension reductions, but also due to the proposed cuts to defence spending. Under pressure from the conservative-nationalist coalition partner in the Syriza government, whose leader, Panos Kammenos, has been the Minister of National Defence since January 2015, rather than cutting the Greek defence budget by 400 million euros, it is set to be reduced by only half that amount.

Turkey, which is regarded in Greece as the main threat to national security, is the principle reason for Greece's high defence spending. However, it is not only because of this sense of danger that nationalists on both the left and right-wings of the political spectrum support the military. The army is also a focus for the country's pork-barrel spending, with the state viewed "as a legitimate object of exploitation by the parties" (Andréas Stergiou). The conservative Prime Minister Antonis Samaras (2012-2015) was heavily criticised when he cut the wages and salaries of military personnel. In fact, Greece has reduced spending on the armed forces since the start of the crisis in 2009.

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The defence budget stood at €7.25 billion in 2009. By 2014, it had dropped to €4.1 billion – and this reduction had a significant impact on military wages, given that personnel expenditure used to account for 73.3 percent of the defence budget.

for a fundamental review of every aspect of the defence sector, from threat analysis to procurement to the structure of the armed forces. There is a need for "intelligent and efficient solutions", as called for in the 2014 white paper published by the Greek Minis-

(Photo: NATO)



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According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' (IISS) The Military Balance 2015, the Greek army comprises 144,950 active personnel (Army: 93,500; Navy: 18,450; Air Force: 21,400; paramilitary forces: 4,000) plus reserves numbering 216,650. The share of GNP spent on the armed forces is currently estimated at 2.4 percent, and is therefore greater than the NATO guideline of two per cent. In terms of GNP, Athens spends twice as much on its armed forces as Berlin does – German spending stands at 1.2 percent. In order to make further savings – in light of the Greek financial crisis – there is a need

try of National Defence. Whether the crisis in Greece can be used as an opportunity to implement further reforms depends on the conditions surrounding them – and, here, Turkey is especially relevant.

Relations with Turkey

"Our country is threatened from the East. We cannot stand defenceless", said Kammenos, the leader of the Independent Greeks and new Minister of Defence, in a radio interview in February 2015. The historic Greek image of the enemy is based on 400 years of Ottoman rule in Greece



(Photo: NATO)

The NATO Missile Firing Installation in Souda Bay, on Crete, is under the command and management of the Hellenic armed forces.

while the ongoing Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus and territorial disputes in the Aegean Sea are straining bilateral relations. The Turkish Government itself, however, has had to note a “spectacular failure” (Günter Seufert) in its foreign policy; Turkey has not been able to establish itself as a regional power in the Middle East, and is in fact rather isolated in the region. In this context, it remains troubling for Athens that Ankara would like to further expand its arms industry to support its regional ambitions and become one of the world’s ten largest arms producers. Developing its own armament capabilities – and the advent of new arms suppliers, such as China – could reduce Turkey’s dependence on the USA and Europe, and increase the scope of its foreign policy.

The Turkish Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, has offered financial aid from his country to help Greece overcome its debt crisis. However, it might be more helpful to reduce political tensions – and that is one area where Ankara could make a contribution without having to make major concessions. This could involve reducing the Aegean Army, which is directed against Greece, and through an easing of territorial disputes. The unresolved dispute over territorial rights in the Aegean Sea brought both countries to the brink of military confrontation in 1996. Since 2014, the number of violations of Greek airspace by Turkish combat aircraft has been increasing. Such shows of force between two NATO partners are unnecessary, and dispensing with such mock battles would ease tensions.

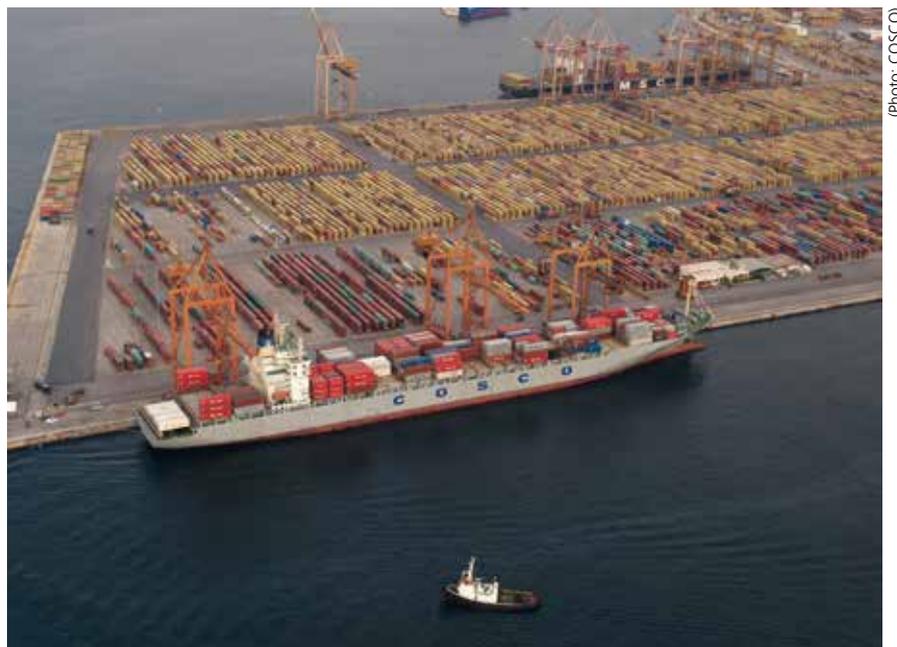
Hopes of seeing an easing of tensions in Greek-Turkish relations seem almost as old as the conflict itself. The potential for Greece to become involved in a conflict remains – not forgetting the dispute with

the “former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” – at a historically low level, and a confrontation with Ankara is unlikely given the numerous issues facing Turkish foreign policy in other neighbouring regions; the situation in Syria and Iraq and the terrorist threat from “Islamic State” (IS) all pose a far greater threat than the long-running dispute between Greece and Turkey. The fact that both countries are members of NATO has a further stabilising effect.

The Sino-Russian Factor

“Right now, we are at the heart of a storm. But we are a seafaring people, and we are not afraid to sail on the open seas, and we will certainly reach a safe haven,” said

Greek leader, Alexis Tsipras, when he met the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, in Moscow in June 2015. Greek sympathy for Moscow is no new phenomenon. At the height of the Cold War, the first Socialist Prime Minister, Andreas Papandreou, allowed the Soviet Navy to anchor between Crete and mainland Greece, and Soviet warships were allowed to enter Greek shipyards for emergency repairs. President Putin wants to build on those great times and believes that a stronger presence on the world’s oceans will lend credence to Russia’s claim to be a major world power. Admiral of the Russian Fleet, Vladimir V. Masorin, said in 2007 that the Russian Navy would rise to become the second largest naval force in the world within 20 years (and that the Navy should therefore be regarded as being of similar significance as the nuclear arsenal). However, the Navy of the People’s Republic of China has twice the number of cruisers, destroyers and frigates, and it still remains to be seen whether the ambitious Russian modernisation programme will be fully realised. Joint Chinese and Russian naval exercises in the Mediterranean in May 2015 served as a reminder of Russia’s ambitions and, above all, were a visible demonstration of Sino-Russian cooperation. With these exercises, Beijing and Moscow also signalled that the Mediterranean should no longer be considered NATO’s “Mare Nostrum” and that a new competitor could be established. The Russian Navy would like to use the Greek port of Piraeus; the Syrian port of Tartus – home to Russia’s last remaining naval base in the Mediterranean – is now judged to



(Photo: COSCO)

China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) was awarded the concession to operate half the Greek container port in Piraeus for a period of 35 years.

be unsafe. However, China has already established itself there through the presence of a state-owned business: In 2009, the logistics company China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) was awarded the concession to operate half the Greek container port (Piers II and III) in Piraeus for a period of 35 years. COSCO plans to invest a total of €3.5 billion in the port. China hopes that Greece will serve to give it an economic toehold in Europe and that Piraeus will be developed into a hub for container traffic. There is also strong Chinese interest in Athens airport. Unlike Moscow, Beijing also has a presence in Greece and the Kremlin has found itself in the role of junior partner. Chinese Communists have evolved into cold and calculating capitalists. However, Russian government interest in Greece extends beyond Greek ports, because Russia sees the European Union as a geopolitical rival and Greek support would allow Russia to increase pressure on disintegrative forces in the European member states. Moscow therefore supports national populist parties in Hungary and France, and is seeking to win over governments in countries like Greece in order to weaken the EU (and therefore, following Russian logic, the USA). But Russia is no longer the Soviet Union, and its available resources have shrunk; the annexation of Crimea and providing support to pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine are taking their toll; so why should Athens receive undue support? In practice, Moscow has declined to buy Greek government bonds and has announced that it will only spend money by investing in a new gas pipeline (to bypass Ukraine in carrying Russian gas to the EU). The Russian Finance Minister, Anton Siluanow, made a succinct appraisal of the situation, saying "If Greece offers commercially interesting projects, we will evaluate them." So, what does Greece have to offer, over and above commerce, that is relevant to security policy?

The Maritime Context

Although the Aegean Sea between Greece and Asia Minor does not lie directly on the major shipping routes of the north-eastern part of the Mediterranean, it is key for maritime access to the Black Sea in the north-east (via the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus). Access to the Bosphorus has always been of high strategic importance for both civilian and military shipping. It provides the Russian Black Sea Fleet with an east-west route to the Atlantic Ocean, and from there into the Indian Ocean. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, NATO has expanded cooperation

with Ukraine and Georgia, both of which border the Black Sea, and has increased the number of its naval operations; in March 2015, NATO conducted naval exercises off the Bulgarian coast. This resulted in a few isolated military incidents, with ships under NATO command being "attacked" by Russian combat aircraft.

NATO uses Crete to give it a geographically strategic toehold in the Middle East. Moreover, the region around Crete plays an important role in the deployment and training of NATO forces. For that reason, NATO bases have often been a focal point for domestic disputes in Greece. Like Papandreou in the 1980s, after winning the election in 2015, Tsipras relaxed his rhetoric about NATO – as recently as the 2012 election campaign, his party, Syriza, had been calling for the closure of NATO operational centres. These calls have disappeared from the current debate. In Greece, NATO has a naval base, which is used by the Member States for stopovers and re-supplying (most recently by German units during emergency rescue operations in the Mediterranean), a NATO Missile Firing Installation (NAMFI), which is under the command and management of the Hellenic armed forces, and a NATO Maritime Interdiction Operational Training

ated with it. The war in the Middle East is causing increasing numbers of people to flee Syria via the eastern Mediterranean. The number of refugees arriving in Greece via the Aegean Sea and the Maritsa river, on the Greek-Turkish land border, rose from 6,500 last year to 77,100 in the first half of 2015. Nearly 60 percent of these refugees are from Syria; others come from Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea and Somalia. Greece is overwhelmed by the tasks of receiving, registering and providing for the refugees, and is not in any position to get the growing refugee problem under control.

Improving the Situation in the Long-Term

Without external support, organised crime and illegal immigration threaten to grow in Greece and there is a risk that nationalist parties will win support. A fragile state could lead to military conflicts in the Mediterranean region if other countries believe their security is threatened. The possibility of a military coup in Greece is not something that can be ruled out in a politically explosive situation. In the medium term, therefore, Berlin and Brussels need to stabilise the unusually populist government in

Photo: Bosphorus Shipyard



Access from the Aegean Sea to the Black Sea through the Bosphorus has always been of high strategic importance.

Centre (NMIOTC). All three facilities are located in Souda on Crete. In addition, the military part of the airport in Chania, on Crete (Souda Air Base), is used by NATO air forces, especially by the US Air Force during operations in the Middle East.

As a member of the Schengen Area, Greece plays an important role in the internal security of the EU, stemming uncontrolled immigration and the organised crime associ-

ated with it. Athens in order to improve the situation in Greece for the long term.

As long as Greece remains rooted in the EU and NATO, the conflict with Turkey can continue to be effectively contained in the future. If the crisis is used as an opportunity to implement further reforms, the Greek armed forces could be better structured for the future, and it may even be possible to further reduce Greek defence spending. ■