

Greece, rising in strategic value, deserves even more US support.

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By Raphael Benaroya

The US Ambassador to Greece, George Tsunis, likes to point out that Ancient Greece was the birthplace of democracy, and Americans and Greeks share many noble ideals. Now, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and weaponization of energy against Europe, Greece has become vital to NATO and American interests. Ambassador Tsunis says that the US and Greece are "at the forefront of the struggle between democratic values ... and the voices of tyranny and authoritarianism." Agreed!

Russia's aggression has made clear that Europe's reliance on Russian energy is a severe vulnerability. Germany, for example, depended on Russia for over 50% of its gas imports. In response to the West's support of Ukraine, Russia has cut off most of Europe's gas supply, so Germany is racing to develop alternatives. But that involves time and large capital outlays for infrastructure to process liquefied natural gas (LNG). Even then, Germany's efforts to boost LNG usage are expected to meet only about 15% of its demand this year.

Much of Europe is even worse off, especially countries without access to the Baltic Sea or the Mediterranean Sea. Such nations must rely on remote conversion of LNG into its gas state, then pipe the gas to local distribution points.

This is where Greece comes in.

Greece's role as a tactical — and reliable — transportation hub has elevated its strategic importance. Greece is redrawing Europe's energy supply map, strengthening the NATO alliance, and advancing US interests in the Mediterranean, Eastern Europe, and beyond.

Geographically, Greece lies on Europe's southern edge, close to rich sources of gas in the Mediterranean and Middle East. Greece's deepwater ports enable goods and energy to flow into Europe from around the world, for both military and commercial purposes. For example, Alexandroupolis, in northeastern Greece, is quickly becoming a critical logistics hub for Southeast Europe and NATO. Significant capital investments have made Alexandroupolis a major civilian/military dual-use facility. The port lies at the heart of a vast oil and gas transportation network, including storage sites, railways, roads, and high-voltage lines. In addition, Alexandroupolis enables shipments to bypass the choke point of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits in Turkey. Not only does this save substantial time and money, it mitigates the security risk of Turkey's diminishing role as NATO's southeastern anchor.

Politically, Greece has formed impressive multilateral relationships with its neighbors in the Balkans, Mediterranean, Middle East, and North Africa — including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. For example, Greece is in advanced discussions about conveying renewable energy from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, through Greece, to Europe. Greece has become a center of productive dialogue for regional economic and security cooperation. In the words of Ambassador Tsunis, Greece provides leadership that “fosters regional prosperity and stability.”

As for the relationship between the US and Greece, government officials of both countries have said that it has “never been stronger.” Prime Minister Mitsotakis has talked about the two countries’ “deep cooperation based on conviction, not convenience.” Indeed, Greece has stood by the US through many international crises

Militarily, Greece has welcomed deployment of American defense assets on its soil, made its ports and airfields readily available to the US, and is a customer for US defense platforms. Greece also hosts several multinational defense entities, including the NATO Rapid Deployment Corps and a NATO Forward Operating Base. In response to the Ukraine war, Greece participates in the NATO Reaction Force and maintains fighters in a state of elevated readiness.

Economically, Greece has made great strides in rebuilding its economy in the wake of the 2007–2008 financial crisis and Great Recession. Like the mythical Phoenix rising from its ashes, Greece achieved 8.3% GDP growth in 2021 and 5.9% in 2022, outpacing other European nations. The country's vital tourism

industry rebounded from the COVID-19 pandemic to enjoy record results this year and last. Greece continues to maintain the largest merchant fleet of ships in the world. And the Greek startup community is growing and increasing in sophistication.

Many economic development projects are underway in Greece — in logistics, technology, services, industry, and energy, to name a few. The current Greek government, led by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and his leadership team, has done an excellent job providing responsible oversight of the Greek economy and encouraging foreign investment to help the economy thrive.

All of these geopolitical, military, and economic factors have elevated Greece's strategic importance as a US ally and as an energy portal to counter Europe's dependence on Russian energy.

However, just as the mythical Odysseus had to navigate between the perils of the Scylla and Charybdis, Greece faces a number of threats and challenges.

First and foremost, Greece's historical rival, Turkey, has stepped up its provocations against the Greeks. Turkey has made territorial claims to Greece's Aegean islands and seabed. It has deepened its ties with Russia, particularly as a customer for Russian energy. It pushes migrants into Greece by sea and by land. And, as ever, Cyprus remains a flashpoint between Turkish and Greek Cypriots.

Even more concerning, Turkey has flown unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and fighter jets over Greek territory, and Turkey's President Erdoğan has engaged repeatedly in belligerent rhetoric against Greece. Even if Erdoğan's vitriol is nationalistic posturing ahead of Turkey's 2023 elections, it increases the chance of unintended armed conflict. And Turkey's threat to Greece's sovereignty is a serious risk to US interests, including NATO's cohesion.

To the Greek government's credit, it stepped up immediately to help Turkey after the February 6, 2023, earthquake along the Turkish-Syrian border. Greece was one of the first countries to send rescue teams to Turkey and played a key role in funneling European resources to the decimated region. President Erdogan's spokesman and chief foreign policy adviser, Ibrahim Kalin, publicly thanked Greece for its efforts. For the sake of U.S. and European interests, let's hope that this "earthquake diplomacy" calms the tensions between Greece and Turkey.

Internally, Greece is confronting Russian attempts to meddle in its upcoming elections and interfere with the control and management of its ports, including Alexandroupolis.

In its 2022 National Security Strategy, the US committed to deepen its alliance with Europe. President Biden said that this relationship is "rooted in shared democratic values, common interest, and historic ties" and called for "standing with our European allies and partners in defense of the rule-based system that underpins our security, prosperity and values."

Accordingly, Greece deserves to be treated as a steadfast foundational partner of the US, on the front lines of building Europe's energy security and strengthening NATO's resilience against aggression and coercion in all forms.

US policies tailored to support Greece should address the following areas:

- Investments. Encourage US firms to aggressively participate in project tenders and investment opportunities in Greek industries, including agriculture, tourism, and technology (such as digital and medical technology). Remove bureaucratic and regulatory impediments to US financial support to

Greece. Shorten the response time of the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to counteract economic influence by Russia and China.

- Security. Actively help Greece manage Turkey's aggression. The US has maintained "equidistance" in the Turkey-Greece conflict to preserve NATO's cohesion. But the US should collaborate with allies who are important trading partners of Turkey to apply pressure on President Erdoğan to avoid further incendiary actions. The US should also continue to engage with Turkey to reinforce its ties to the West and ensure that it does not drift further away toward Russia or other adversaries of the West.
- Defense. Step up the US's contribution to Greece's defense as an important part of NATO capabilities and readiness. Intensify military-to-military cooperation, joint exercises, and intelligence-sharing. (Details on specific military cooperation projects and defense platforms are outside the scope of this article.)
- Diplomacy. Encourage Greece to further forge multilateral economic and security cooperation in the Balkans, Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East, and North Africa. Strong cooperation among regional players will foster self-reliance in dealing with regional conflicts and free up US assets to engage in other high-risk areas, particularly the Indo-Pacific region.
- Logistics. Lead the effort to accelerate Greece's strategic logistics capabilities to offset the impact of Russia's energy threat to Europe. That effort should include enhancing the Alexandroupolis port; extending high-capacity fuel pipelines for Eastern Europe and NATO; building more roads, railways, and pipeline infrastructure to interconnect Eastern Europe; constructing new facilities to increase the use of renewable energy and LNG; and adding logistics hubs to ensure food security, which has been imperiled by the Ukraine war.

In the US National Security Strategy, President Biden said that we have entered a "decisive decade" in which "the need for a strong and purposeful American role in the world has never been greater." To address the growing risks to American interests across the globe, the US needs enduring regional alliances based on shared democratic ideals, common interests, and a proven commitment to cooperate. In short, the US needs to build more relationships based on "conviction, not convenience" — like its relationship with Greece.

As a loyal and strategically vital ally, Greece needs — and deserves — America full and unwavering support in return.

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