

Revisiting the Triangle of Turkey, Greece and the United States

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RÉSUMÉ

La transformation systémique des années 1990 a posé des défis politiques importants pour ce qui est du triangle Turquie-Etats-Unis-Grèce. Les étudiants des relations internationales et de sécurité sont confrontés à des casse-têtes intrigants : y-a-t-il une série de cycles ou de fluctuations dans le courant fondamentalement continu des relations entre la Turquie, les Etats-Unis et la Grèce ? De quelle manière la position et le comportement des Etats-Unis, de la Turquie et de la Grèce ont changé? La configuration du pouvoir dans le triangle a-t-il été affectée par le nouveau décor de sécurité et, si oui, de quelle façon? Ce bref article cherche à identifier le cadre théorique pour mieux analyser ces questions. Il examine les rôles, visions et stratégies des trois acteurs dans le nouveau système international et procure une évaluation initiale de leur pouvoir et influence respectifs.

ABSTRACT

The systemic transformation of the 1990s has posed significant political challenges for the Turkish-US-Greek triangle. For students of international relations and security studies this offers intriguing puzzles: Is there a series of cycles or fluctuations in an essentially continuous flow of Turkish-US-Greek relations? How did the position and behavior of the US, Turkey and Greece change? Has the constellation of power in the triangle been affected by the new security setting and, if so, how? This brief article seeks to identify the analytical framework for best addressing these issues. It examines the roles, visions and strategies of the three actors in the new international system and provides an initial assessment of their relative power and influence.

The Impact of Change

With the end of the bipolar structure of East-West competition Europe's morphology was transformed and with it the nature of the triangular bargain. In order to assess the evolution of the relationship in the 1990s and likely future trends and patterns of behaviour, sever-

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al questions should be addressed: how did the behaviour of the US, Turkey and Greece change as a result of systemic transformation? Finally, and this is the central to our question, has the constellation of power in the triangle been affected by the new security setting and, if so, how?

The American Context

The central strategic questions confronting the US since the end of the Cold War remain the same but must be framed in a radically different strategic environment. The questions are as follows: What are the principal threats to American interests? How can those interests best be defended? What combination of economic, diplomatic and military instruments should be used to protect and advance US interests? These are the enduring questions of US strategy, even if they are often obscured by political rhetoric and heated debate over particular military policies and weapons programmes.¹

In terms of military might, the US is unquestionably the most powerful country in the contemporary system. This does not mean, as already mentioned, that the US has hegemonic power to the extent that it could, if it wished, impose its military will wherever it chose. A land war in Asia, for instance, would be as inadvisable now as it has been in the past. It does, however, mean that the US possesses the most capable and flexible forces in the world, especially in critical areas such as airlift and sealift, which can carry forces to trouble spots around the globe (see former Yugoslavia). American superpower status is by no means confined to the military dimension. In addition, the US still has the largest and most vibrant single national economy. The combination of the two, in turn, drives the political and military strategy of “engagement and enlargement” that has become the lynchpin of US foreign and national security policy.

However, in the long run, we need to think about the diffusion of power in the world capitalist system. This phenomenon has two major dimensions: the expansion and globalisation of interdependence, and

the relative economic decline of the US. Both dimensions have been well chronicled. What is important in the context of this article, are the implications, if any, for US foreign policy.

In traditional terms of interest, the US faces an interest-threat mismatch. In other words, where America's most vital interest exists, there is no external threat (with the exception of the Persian Gulf) but only internal instability pressures (see the Balkans and the Central Asia and Caucasus). How does the US respond to this situation? Although international policy co-ordination has never been more difficult, there is evidence to support the thesis that US foreign policy-making élites are attempting to craft a coherent policy by pursuing a strategy that promotes American power, position and primacy, in order to enhance the capacity of the US to exercise influence abroad. In the short run, complacency is an option, although initial inaction in Bosnia simply made the whole issue more difficult to deal with. In the longer run, the US is redefining interest, extending the importance of situation in nontraditional ways. The terms of reference of the Cold War framework clearly do not match evolving reality.

The 1996 edition of "A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement" attempted to meet this challenge by delineating three categories of situations where the application of US forces might be contemplated. The first involves US 'vital interest', which is a standard condition. In addition, however, two other categories are added: cases where 'important, but not vital' interests are involved, and 'primarily humanitarian interests'. Moreover, the document notes that the world has changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War, but American leadership is still essential to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the new international environment. It argues that US strategy has three central goals: (1) enhance its security; (2) promote America's economic revitalization; and (3) promote democracy abroad. These goals are mutually supporting, because prosperous democracies are likely to remain at peace with one another and with the US, and because security is often a condition for democracy and free trade. For American policy-makers, the US can support these goals through international engagement and efforts to enlarge the

community of democracies. It is important to note that successive reviews of this document have not altered its basic premises for the role, strategy and identification of US interests.²

American action in the Gulf, Haiti, Somalia, Yugoslavia and the Korean Peninsula represents the continuation of Washington's commitment to an active internationalist agenda, even without a geopolitical and ideological rival. This American globalism is compatible with a set of principles that have come to be associated with world order, stability, and thus vital US interests. Another case in point is the US post-Cold War European strategy. As Nye and Keohane have commented, American influence in Europe was greater during the early 1990s than the mid-1980s.³ The US successfully sought to prevent a loss of influence in Europe by maintaining a complex of interests that had formed around institutions, namely NATO, that it had itself created. Although, the Bush administration implemented a 25 per cent reduction in the American force under strong congressional pressure to cut the defense budget in the spring of 1990, it succeeded in maintaining the centrality of NATO in European defense (against French attempts to undermine that strategy), and was by and large to keep US policy, preferences and interest intact. NATO was central to the American strategy for remaining the most influential state in the world in the post-Cold War era, and emphasis on the alliance was consistent with the American position throughout the Cold War years.

There is, therefore, a US international strategy with a very strong element of continuity: a global foreign policy inspired by *realpolitik* efforts to prevent other states from 'renationalizing' their foreign and security policies. Such a policy of renationalization would destroy the reassurance and stability upon which American interests are pressured to rest.⁴ Global activism and the centrality of a strong NATO in the framework of European security and stability are the fundamentals of the US post-Cold War foreign and security policy through which the Turkish-US-Greek interaction should be examined.

The Greek Context

In the past, the advent of multipolarity stimulated repositioning. States are expected to readjust their alignments and change the course of their national security policies to accommodate shifts in the hierarchy of world power. The challenge for Greece has been similar. What was the impact of the dramatic systemic transformation on the country's international position and foreign policy strategy?

While for many commentators, the collapse of the Soviet pole meant the triumph of the Western paradigm of pluralist democracy, free market economy and their institutional safeguards (NATO, EC, GATT, IMF, etc), for Greece, world transformation represented a grave need to learn and re-adjust. Cold War stability was replaced by post-Cold War stress and turbulence affecting the country's northern neighborhood. Less than orderly political transitions, bankrupt economies, sharp ethnic conflicts and border disputes on Greece's northern periphery threatened and still threaten regional stability and vital national interests.

Throughout the post-1974 period, Greek national strategy was based on containing the Turkish threat. The end of the Cold War added to the problem of the 'danger from the east' the collapse of a stable regional environment. Greece could not remain indifferent to these developments. The disintegration of Yugoslavia clearly resulted in potential dangers to the country's territorial integrity and to its social and political order. Athens had to deal with the complex issues of the region brought about by the end of the Cold War. The events are well known, as is the failure of Greek governments to formulate a coherent and effective Balkan policy and thus play a key role in the resolution of the crisis. Instead, to a certain extent, Greece became part of the problem. Of course, the problems in the Balkans were not the result of Greek actions. The failure of Greek governments was mainly the result of an inability to grasp the complexity of the situation. A situation, which apart from the problem of ethnic, political and social disorder, was aggravated by the involvement of third regional and non-regional powers that pursued divergent policies, and whose

interests were not always compatible. The complexity of actors, roles, policies and perceived interests partly explains why the crisis in Yugoslavia was bound to cascade into neighboring countries not directly involved, like Greece. Undoubtedly, the FYROM quest for statehood and nationhood as well as the incoherent Albanian attempt to create a new ideological identity in the place of a bankrupt Stalinist model generated considerable security anxiety in Greece which led to policy without basic direction and well assessed goals. Although, Greece was well equipped to deal effectively with the negative Balkan conditions, Athens was caught in a vicious cycle of reacting to individual events, rather than understanding, evaluating and being ahead of them.

Therefore, Greek foreign policy in the (at least) first half of the 1990s found itself in a state of Balkan 'suffocation'. The situation started reversing itself, with the advent of the Simitis Government in 1996. Greece seemed to rediscover its role and unfold its capabilities to respond successfully to the regional challenges.

In the post-Dayton era, Greek foreign policy-makers have been attempting to play a stabilizing role in the Balkan region by formulating at last a comprehensive and cooperative approach to the region's problems. The endeavour to define and pursue an appropriate strategy continued, with considerable success, in the Kosovo crisis as well as in the most recent Yugoslav internal developments that led to the dramatic change of guard in Belgrade, a change that seems to open up the prospects of democratisation of that country and its return to international legitimacy. Greece's upgraded role in Southeastern Europe is based on its strong economic performance. Solid progress over the second half of the 1990s has guaranteed Greece's participation in the European Monetary Union – the hard core of the European integration process – as well as a constructive and dynamic presence on the regional scene. Furthermore, a stable and dynamic economy is broadening its foreign policy perspectives and enhancing its role as a stabilizer.⁵

The Turkish Context

Over the years, Turkey has been able to effectively exploit its strategic position to obtain all types of assistance from the US, NATO, the EU, individual Western countries, the USSR, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. At the same time, Turkey has been accusing the West of not being responsive to its needs despite its contributions to Western security effort. Turkey has attributed this to the activities of the Greek-American lobby in Washington and to EU's discriminatory attitude towards its Muslim identity.⁶

In the 1990s, the changing international system left Turkey in a state of anxiety, because the prospect of losing its traditional Cold war leverage *vis-à-vis* the West and the USSR was considered real both inside and outside the country. According to Sezer, the collapse of the USSR "has had enormous adverse repercussions on an entirely different front: cohesion in the western world. For Ankara, this has meant less confidence in the willingness and ability of major NATO allies to continue business as usual with Turkey."⁷ Developments in the east had outpaced whatever meager prospects Turkey might have enjoyed in western European eyes.⁸ In sum, the changing geopolitical environment in the late 1980s and early 1990s presented Turkey with many new challenges. These included a fragmentation of power along its northern and northeastern borders following upon the strategic withdrawal of Soviet/Russian power; the multiplication of political actors in the wider Eurasian region; the emergence and, in some cases, intensification of local conflicts with the potential to escalate into larger regional conflicts; and the absence of an easily conceived and articulated threat, further isolating Turkey from mainstream European political and economic developments.⁹

At that time, the quest for a new role, that of peacemaker and regional stabilizer began. President Özal went on to define Turkey as a regional model for the region by its being Islamic, democratic, secular and, above all, stable in the center of a world breaking up from the Balkans, to the former USSR and Middle East. The Gulf War could not have come at a better time as it simply validated Turkey's self-definition and role in the region.¹⁰

In this context, special reference must be made to the concept of Turkey as a 'pivotal state'. Its significance lies not so much in its geostrategic value, as in the destabilization and uncertainty problems that its decline might result to.¹¹ The regional balance and for that reason the geostrategic value and role of Turkey depends and will depend on a number of factors, which seemingly would contribute – not evenly – to either enhancing or diminishing Turkey's role in regional and world politics, in the framework of the US foreign policy and security interests:¹² The relations between USA/West and Iran; the Syrian-Israeli relations which are directly linked with the future strategic orientation of the former; the relations between USA/West and Iraq; the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle east; the relations between the West and Russia as well as the general foreign and security policy goals of Moscow; the Turkish-Russian relations, especially in strategic environment of Caucasus and Central Asia; the continuation and intensification of the conventional arms race in the region and the horrifying prospect of the proliferation of mass destruction weapons; the stability prospects of the Central Asian countries and the security of the oil routes; the security and welfare of the Muslim populations in the Balkans; the value and position of Turkey in the club of the big emerging markets; the more general American interest for the wider region; the issue of the control of water resources; the evolution of European integration, especially in the field of foreign, security and defense policy; the future of the EU-Turkish relations and the prospects of membership; and finally the issue of Turkish national power itself, with reference to not only military dimension but mainly to the political, economic and social development of the country.

Reflections on the Troubled Triangle

In the context of the effects that systemic transformation had on the US, Turkey and Greece, a central question is the extent to which change has been cyclical or cumulative. The general course of events is well known as well are the policy problems. What we need to assess

here are the implications of the new structural changes that have occurred, and the extent to which assumptions of continuity and change are valid. There is a central question in that context: How should the United States and Greece develop their relationship with Turkey in light of Turkey's role and potential?

As already mentioned, Greeks have spent the past twenty years perceiving external threat from a single source, Turkey. Military and diplomatic deterrence was indispensable to the concept of Greek survival. Ironically, although the end of the Cold War resulted in the overnight transformation of the military situation in Europe, no other country experienced the change less intensely than Greece. The 'new world order' did not change the basic parameters as these have been consistently articulated by both Greek elites and public opinion. The Greek point of view consistently treats Greece as *status quo* country, and Turkey as an adversary who has never stopped pursuing revisionist policies in Cyprus, the Aegean, and Thrace as well as aiming at altering the balance of power and interests in the region.

Turkey's international position and its importance for the US has not changed either. Many observers in Turkey and the West anticipated that Turkey would be a leading casualty of strategic neglect after the Cold War. Although the longer-term implications of developments in Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East for Turkey's interests and geopolitical orientation are not yet clear, the Gulf War and subsequent developments have returned Turkey to the strategic front rank.¹³ For the US, the Middle East remains an area of vital importance. Turkey's growing significance is much more powerfully defined by its centrality to a region of major instability and conflagration.

At the same time, however, this growing significance has produced a set of uncertainties directly linked with what has been an unusually poor (for Turkish diplomacy) perception of national capabilities and post-Cold War opportunities. For the first time in Turkey's post-Ottoman history, the country's foreign policy élites attempted to revise the traditional Atatürkist precepts regarding the dangers of international activism. This attempt was largely in accordance with

many analysts' suggestions. According to Lesser, for almost forty years, Ankara's geostrategic reach was largely limited to its place within NATO's Southern Region. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and turmoil in the Balkans, Ankara was poised to play a leading role across a vast region, from Eastern Europe to western China. This assumption emanates directly from a US analysis based on geostrategic projections which include expectations that Turkey will contain Iran in the East and Syria in the South, stand up against Russia in the North, and help stabilise the Balkans in the West. However, this attempt to establish new spheres of influence has not lived up to expectations (so far). According to Kuhnhardt, that has to do with the fact that Turkey's ability to project the necessary power as a regional *force d'ordre* is relative. Not only has Russia returned to the region of its direct South, in an attempt to demonstrate what the geopolitical notion of a 'near abroad' could mean to a wounded, yet relevant, world power, but the Western world has begun to discover the Caucasus and Central Asia on their own terms.¹⁴ This development may imply a limited interest in the region or it may suggest that Western actors have not yet clearly defined their individual interests and thus, not yet determined how to deal strategically and economically with it, which is more likely. This does not imply that Turkey does not have an important role to play in the region. Rather, it means that this role passes through its position as a fundamental and irreplaceable NATO partner in an area of volatility and unstable transformation. In the exclusive framework of western interests, this fact could assign an extremely important standing to Turkey. Those who seek to redefine Turkey's role in world politics in terms of multiple options may credibly do so only as long as they root their logic in the irretrievable fact that NATO membership is the single most important factor defining Turkey's standing in the Western camp.¹⁵ NATO membership is the basis for any Turkish strategic or operational outreach.

In addition, the relative stagnation in EU-Turkish relations, despite the decisions taken at the 1999 Helsinki Summit, has also contributed to the sense of disappointment and uncertainty, and has made Turkish

behaviour towards Greece more unpredictable and perhaps harder for the US to control. If Turkey cannot strengthen its relationship with the EU in the context of future membership, it cannot successfully pursue its legitimate foreign policy goals. For the EU it would be a disaster to 'lose' Turkey, but how to properly bind it to Europe seems not very clear even after Helsinki. The policy implications for Greece are that the longer the relationship between Turkey and the EU remains overshadowed by uncertainties, the more the US remains the only and undisputed arbiter in a balance-of-power conflict. The nature of the European integration process has all the systemic properties needed to fundamentally alter the exclusive geopolitical, zero-sum-game quality of the Greek-Turkish conflictual relationship.

If there is indeed a Helsinki spirit, more than anything else it reveals the need for a more strategic approach towards each other for both countries. Both countries have a longer-term strategic interest in seeing Turkey's EU vocation succeed. Such a success has the potential of changing Greece's perception of threat, and fostering political and economic reform in a Turkey reassured about its place in Europe. The US and Europe will benefit from a more effective and predictable strategic partnership with Turkey. A key task for US foreign policy élites will be to make sure that Greek-Turkish brinkmanship no longer threatens broader interests in regional détente and integration. The stakes of bringing to fruition this strategy of reciprocal accommodation are extremely high. Lasting rapprochement would yield enormous benefits for everybody involved.¹⁶

However, such a rapprochement remains nascent and fragile for three main reasons. First, most of the changes have come on the Greek side. There has been no major shift in Turkish policy. Without a Turkish gesture it may prove difficult for Athens to maintain domestic support over the long run. Indeed, the Greek government operates with the benefit of the doubt even within its own party lines. Second, so far the rapprochement has been limited to less-controversial areas such as trade, the environment, and tourism. The really sensitive issues have yet to be addressed. The current climate will prove its durability only when these issues show themselves in the reconciliation

agenda. Finally, there is the issue of Cyprus. While Cyprus is technically not a bilateral issue, it is an integral element of the broader fabric of the relationship and cannot be ignored. Although there is a politically costly effort to downplay the linkage by Athens, without progress on Cyprus the current rapprochement will be impossible to sustain over time.¹⁷

At the same time, to the extent that Turkish incorporation to the EU remains an open question for years to come, the Greek-US-Turkish entanglement becomes even more complex. The issue here, is the extent to which US strategy as far as the management of the Greek-Turkish conflict is concerned will remain the same. We have already identified strong elements of continuity in US foreign policy in general. In the context of Greek-US relations, the analysis was in the past shaped predominantly by the Greek-Turkish debate. This was appropriate given the pre-eminent perception of the Turkish threat in Greece since 1974, but the rhetoric of this debate continues to shape both Greek and American thinking and strategy. As a result, the issue of US leadership is given continuing prominence.

Conclusion

Since 1980, what does exist between the two countries is a low intensity conflict, disrupted by shorter or longer *détente* breaks. It has also been described as a relationship of manageable tension. It is a situation that has the disturbing potential of escalating to a more serious crisis with alarming destabilizing effects at a regional level. Successive governments in Athens have conceptualized the problem in a fundamentally different way. For Greece, the issue has always been one of a Turkish revisionist threat, and any attempt to normalize bilateral relations is inevitably conditioned not only by the thesis that Ankara should stop pursuing any *anti-status quo* policies, but also by the need to find a viable solution to the Cyprus problem, acceptable to both communities. The policy pursued by Greece has two dimensions: it has been both a policy of deterrence, and a policy of political de-escalation.

lation. This twin character has been compatible with the crisis prevention policy of the US, and has enabled Athens and Washington to converge on the specific issue of relaxation of tension in the Aegean.

A full discussion of the history and points of contention in Greek-Turkish relations is beyond the scope of this article. What is important here is that overall American strategic interests in the areas have almost inevitably drawn the US into the dispute. For decades, a major failure of US foreign policy has been its inability to get the two allies astride the Aegean to settle their differences through compromise and cooperation. Washington's efforts have not, of course, been entirely fruitless. In January 1996, American diplomatic intervention prevented a major crisis from escalating into violent conflict. President Clinton, as Bush before him, repeatedly pledged to prioritize the solution of the Cyprus problem at the top of the US foreign policy agenda. However, succeeding administrations have been unable to exert the pressure needed to produce lasting results. The passing of time has done nothing to reduce the gulf that divides the island's two communities or the suspicion with which Athens and Ankara view each other.¹⁸ At the same time, Turkey's domestic political and social grievances have served to make it more inflexible and to aggravate Turkish relations with the EU and to a lesser extent the USA.

In the framework of NATO, the augmented emphasis on Mediterranean stability necessitated a cohesive southeastern flank free from the Greek-Turkish impasse. In what appeared to be a critical step in easing an extremely strained relationship after the 1996 crisis, the US behind the scenes of the Madrid NATO Summit in 1997 pressured the two countries to sign the Madrid Joint Declaration, whereby they committed to engage themselves to a peaceful and consensual settlement of their differences. If both sides indeed adhered to it, the communiqué portended a significant step in advancing stability and security in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁹ But the expected shifts in relations did not follow. Cyprus, not specifically alluded to in the Madrid Declaration, offered the setting for new-old tensions during the same year. Joint Greek and Greek Cypriot military exercises a few months later were enriched by intense and the usual alarming dog-fights in the Greek and Cypriot airspace.

The argument here has identified some underlying issues which have been dictating the conduct of the trilateral interactions; namely, wider US geostrategic interests; regional turmoil; and national uncertainties. On the eve of the twenty-first century, although there is guarded optimism, the prospects for Greek-Turkish relations remain uncertain. The Aegean and Cyprus will remain potential flashpoints and pose a continuous problem of crisis prevention for the US (and Europe). The Greek sense of insecurity in relation to a neighbor of continental scale and uncertain strategic orientation has been sustained by issues like the Turkish threat that a Greek declaration of a 12-mile territorial sea limit would be a *casus belli*. Of course, this is not a new development. Successive Turkish governments have employed such a threat since 1974. The new element is Turkey's post Cold-War domestic and foreign policy uncertainties and the extent to which US policy will prove to be successful in diffusing any new crisis.

NOTES

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2. The White House, **A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement**, February 1996.
3. J.S. Nye and R.O. Keohane, "The United States and International Institutions in Europe After the Cold War," in R.O. Keohane, J.S. Nye and S. Hoffmann (eds), **After the Cold War: International Institutions and State Strategies in Europe, 1989-1991**, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 105.
4. The assumption is that if Washington cannot or would not solve other's problems for them, the world order strategy would collapse. Compelled to provide for their own security, others would have to emerge as great or regional powers and behave like independent geopolitical actors. See C. Layne and B. Schwartz, "American Hegemony Without an Enemy," in **Foreign Policy**, 92, Fall, 1993, p. 15.
5. Although the unprecedented and undemocratic treatment of the Greek minority in Southern Albania in the October 2000 municipal elections have clouded the Greek-Albanian relations, their development since 1997 in both political and economic levels has been more than encouraging. The same is even more

true in the cases of Bulgaria and Romania. In all three cases, Greece is among the top three countries in aid, foreign investment and trade. Relations with FYROM have been also improving, since the signing of the Interim Accord between the two countries in September 1995. Transport, energy, banking, communications, customs, hydro-economy, police and cultural matters are sectors of rapid cooperation. Greek companies hold first place among foreign investors with Greece currently being FYROM's second largest partner.

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8. Sezer, **ibid.**
9. Sezer, **ibid.**, pp. 74-75.
10. Coufoudakis, **ibid.**, p. 394.
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16. C.A. Kupchan, "Greek-Turkish Rapprochement: Strategic Interests and High Stakes", in **The Strategic Regional Report**, vol. 5(2), February 2000, p. 9.
17. F.S. Larrabee, "Greek-Turkish Rapprochement: Is it Durable?", in **The Strategic Regional Report**, Vol. 5(4), May/June 2000, p. 15.
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19. S.V. Papacosma, NATO, "Greece, and the Balkans in the Post-Cold War Era" in Coufoudakis, Psomiades and Gerolymatos, **Greece and the New Balkans**, pp. 61-62.