

GREECE, 70 YEARS IN NATO



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National and Kapodistrian University of Athens



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About the author

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Abstract

In 2022 Greece celebrates 70 years as a member of NATO since its inclusion in the Alliance on February 18, 1952. The 70th anniversary of the accession of Greece to NATO marks a critical point in the history of the Alliance and of Greek self-perception in the international milieu. In the light of renewed Russian aggression and revisionism NATO is facing dire challenges in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean Sea. Greece's role is essential in this context, as Greece's strategic position as a southern bastion of NATO in proximity to Northern Africa, the Middle East, but also the Black Sea and Eastern Europe highlights Greece's importance.

Greece, 70 Years in NATO

1. Greece's historical trajectory as a NATO member

In 2022 Greece celebrated its 70 years as a NATO member, a constituent part of the most important military alliance globally. The entry of Greece into NATO in 1952 was a decision of unprecedented historical importance for war-torn Greece with benefits reaching up to the current period.¹

Greece is a country located on the southern periphery of Europe, at the geographical juncture of the Aegean and the Black Sea. Greece's geographical position during the Cold War made it effectively a frontier state of the Western democratic core as opposed to the continental landmass controlled by USSR and its satellites in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Greece's cultural and historical trajectory as the birthplace of democracy and its geopolitical identity as a sea

¹ Ioannis E. Kotoulas, "Greece as a NATO Member in the Long Durée", *The Bellona Quarterly* 703, no. 4, 2020, pp. 84-98, <https://kwartalnikbellona.com/resources/html/article/details?id=211534>.

power in the historical *longue durée* sealed its membership in the coalition of the Free World in the early Cold War period.²

On 18 February 1952, Greece was formally welcomed as one of NATO's first new members since the creation of the Alliance in 1949, along with Turkey. Greece and Turkey formed the emerging Southeastern Flank of the Alliance extending the jurisdiction of the Euro-Atlantic security framework to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Speaking at the meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Lisbon, 20 February 1952, two days after the accession of Greece, Greek Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Sophocles Venizelos (1894-1964) highlighted the strategic importance of Greece's membership in the Alliance and the common values inherent in the institution:

Greece is extremely glad that in future she will be a member of this Treaty whose aims and principles correspond so closely, to her own. We believe, like all of you* in the need for safeguarding democratic freedom and preserving the common civilization of our peoples. We believe in the possibility of promoting stability and well-being in our own area» and we are equally convinced that the organization of a truly efficient system of collective security constitutes the best means of preserving peace and ensuring justice and liberty in fulfilment of the most ardent aspirations of the Greek nation, a nation which in recent years has suffered much. [...] Greece fully realizes the extent of the responsibility she is called upon to assume here, and she will meet it with the same, determination with which, not long ago, with the help of the friendly nations whose invaluable support she is not likely to forget, she met the Impact of Communist aggression.³

² I.E. Kotoulas, 'Greece as a frontline state in the historical *longue durée*', *Journal of Military Studies* 10 (2021), 82-89, <https://doi.org/10.2478/jms-2021-0010>.

³ North Atlantic Council, Ninth Session, Summary Record of the First Meeting Held at the Palacio Assembleia Nacional, Lisbon, on Wednesday, 20th February 1952, at 3 p.m., https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/2/0/20258/C_9-R_1_ENG.pdf.

Greece's membership in the 1950s was furthered by the general geopolitical environment of the period.⁴ NATO had been founded in 1949 as a coalition of sea-oriented democracies based on the core of the Atlantic states of North America and the coastal states of Western Europe. In 1952 NATO expanded to include Greece and Turkey, thus creating a southeastern flank facing the Balkans and the Caucasus, both of which were dominated by the Socialist bloc and the Soviet Union.⁵

In the previous years to its NATO accession, Greece fighting on the side of the Allies since 1940 had faced a decade of destruction since the Axis occupation in 1941 and until the end of the Greek Civil War (1944-1949) in 1949 with the defeat of the communist insurgency which was backed by the Eastern Bloc. Greece had been in effect the first battleground between the free democratic world and Soviet-inspired totalitarianism even during the Second World War, as the Greek government faced a pro-Soviet communist insurgency in December 1944. The formation of the new bipolar world system of the Cold War had considerable impact on the position of Greece and of the development of new ideological references concerning Greek foreign policy. The Greek Civil War (1944-1949) was the first armed confrontation between the democratic West and the communist East fought on the geopolitical region identified in Classical Geopolitics as the Rimland, the coastal regions of Eurasia hindering the seaward geopolitical orientation of the major continental power controlling the Eurasian hinterland, in this case the USSR.⁶

⁴ Ioannis E. Kotoulas, 'Greece as a NATO Member in the Long Durée', *The Bellona Quarterly* 703, no. 4, 2020, pp. 84-98, <https://kwartalnikbellona.com/resources/html/article/details?id=211534>.

⁵ Mark Smith, *NATO Enlargement during the Cold War: Strategy and System in the Western Alliance* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 62-95; D. Binder, 'Greece, Turkey and NATO', *Mediterranean Quarterly* 2, no. 2, Spring 2012, pp. 95-106.

⁶ B. Kondis, 'The Termination of the Greek Civil War: Its International Implications', *Balkan Studies* 29:2 (1988), 299-307; G. Roberts, 'Moscow's Cold War on the Periphery: Soviet Policy in Greece, Iran, and Turkey, 1943-8', *Journal of Contemporary History* 46:1 (2011), 58-81; N. Marantzidis, 'The Greek Civil War and the International Communist System', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15:4 (2013), 25-54; I.E. Kotoulas, 'Greece as a frontline state in the historical longue durée', *Journal of Military Studies* 10 (2021), 82-83, <https://doi.org/10.2478/jms-2021-0010>.

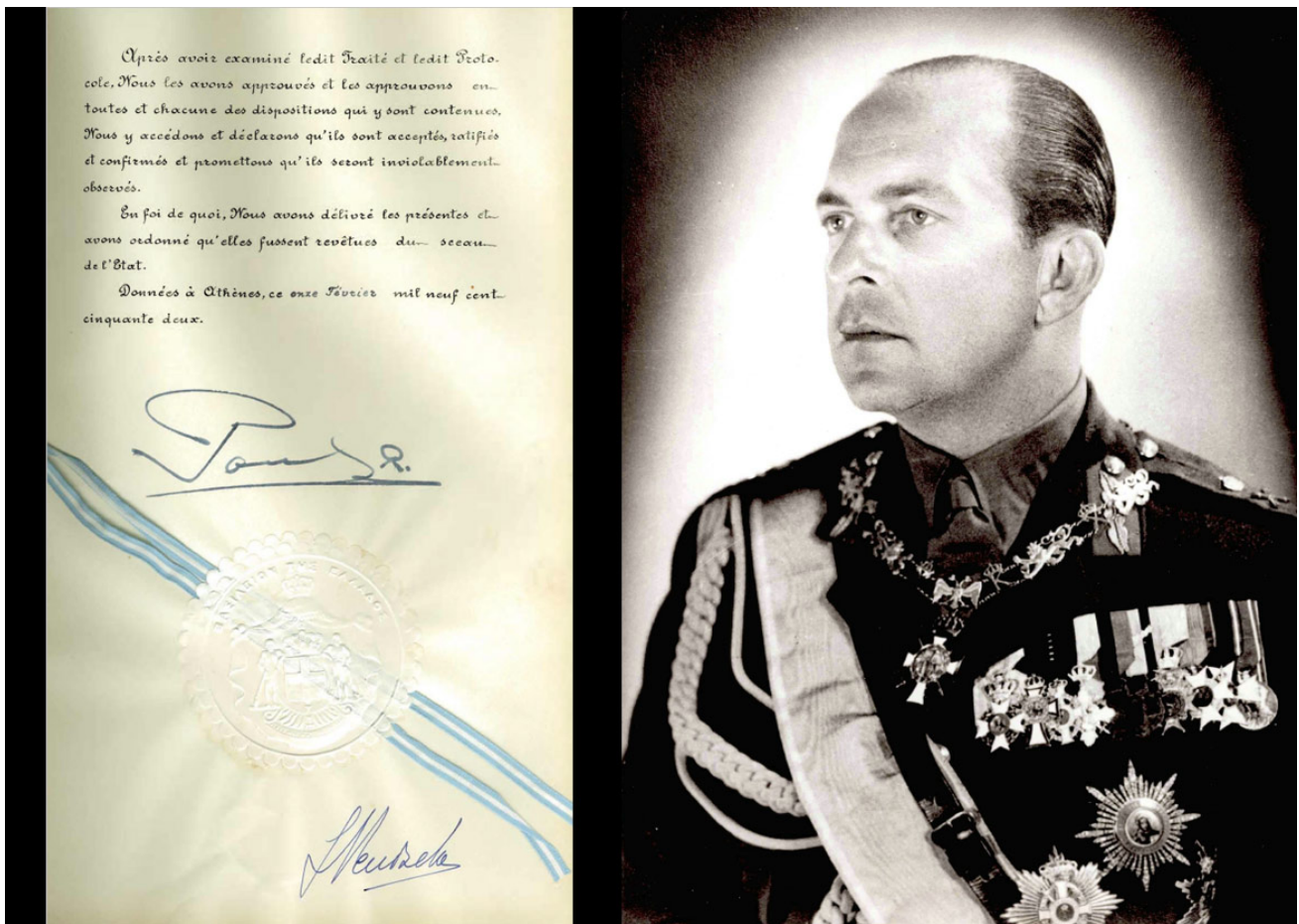


Fig. 1: His Majesty King Paul I, King of the Hellenes, signed the Instrument of accession for Greece in Athens on 11 February 1952

Membership in NATO achieved in 1952 was thus a seminal landmark erasing the geopolitical uncertainty of the recent past and guaranteeing Greece's membership in the hard core of Western security architecture.

The Western perception of Soviet revisionism concerning the post-war world was greatly strengthened during the Korean War (1950-1953). The conflict in Korea was perceived as a military manifestation of Soviet revisionism along the whole stretch of the coastal belt of Eurasia, from Eastern Asia to non-communist Western and South Europe. In this context Greece's strategic importance increased, easing Greece's subsequent entry in NATO structure. Greece itself would adopt a proactive strategic mentality just months after the end of the communist insurgency, by sending troops in 1950 in an overseas commitment, in support of the

United Nations to defend South Korea from the North Korean incursion across the 38th parallel.

Greece's strategic value for the strategy of the Western alliance had been made evident during the Korean War, if not earlier. But it was especially the manifestation of Soviet revisionism in parts of the coastal Eurasian strategic area, i.e. the Rimland, part of which the Korean Peninsula is, that alerted the U.S. to the global aspirations of the Communist bloc which in the 1950s was the Sino-Soviet nexus. NSC 103/1, a memorandum by the US National Security Council issued in February 1951 ('The Position of the United States with Respect to Greece') highlighted the strategic importance of Greece for US and Western interests:

1. It continues to be in the security interest of the United States that Greece not fall under communist domination. a. Greece occupies an important strategic position which, in the hands of an enemy, would be a threat to the Eastern Mediterranean, the Suez, Turkey and the Turkish Straits. Communist domination of Greece would serve as a springboard for communist penetration, political and military, into the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East area. b. Communist domination of Greece would damage U.S. prestige and weaken the will to resist in other countries threatened with communist domination. c. Communist domination of Greece could only be viewed as one in a series of military and political consequences which would gravely threaten the security of the United States.⁷

By entering NATO Greece became a member in the most powerful military alliance of modern history guaranteeing its safety in the general geopolitical environment of the Cold War. During the Cold War Greece, very much like West Germany, was a frontline state of the Alliance being the only Western country and only NATO member to share land borders with three socialist states, i.e. Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Of these three, especially Bulgaria was a fundamental security concern for Greece. Bulgaria recognized Greek borders as late as 1964

⁷ Foreign Relations of the United States 1951, The Near East and Africa, Vol. V, Document 212, NSC 103/1, Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1982, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v05/d212>.

and during the Cold War was in charge of undermining operations for the Southeastern Flank of NATO, including Greece and Turkey. Greek membership in NATO was combined with a proactive foreign policy and commitment to the strategic interests of the Alliance that lasted for decades.⁸



Fig. 2: Greece as a part of NATO's Southeastern Flank blocking Soviet expansion in the Mediterranean

⁸ Van Coufoudakis & Yannis G. Valinakis, 'The Evolution of Greece's Defense Strategy in Relation to NATO Contingencies', *The International Spectator* 22, no. 1, 1987, pp. 30-35.

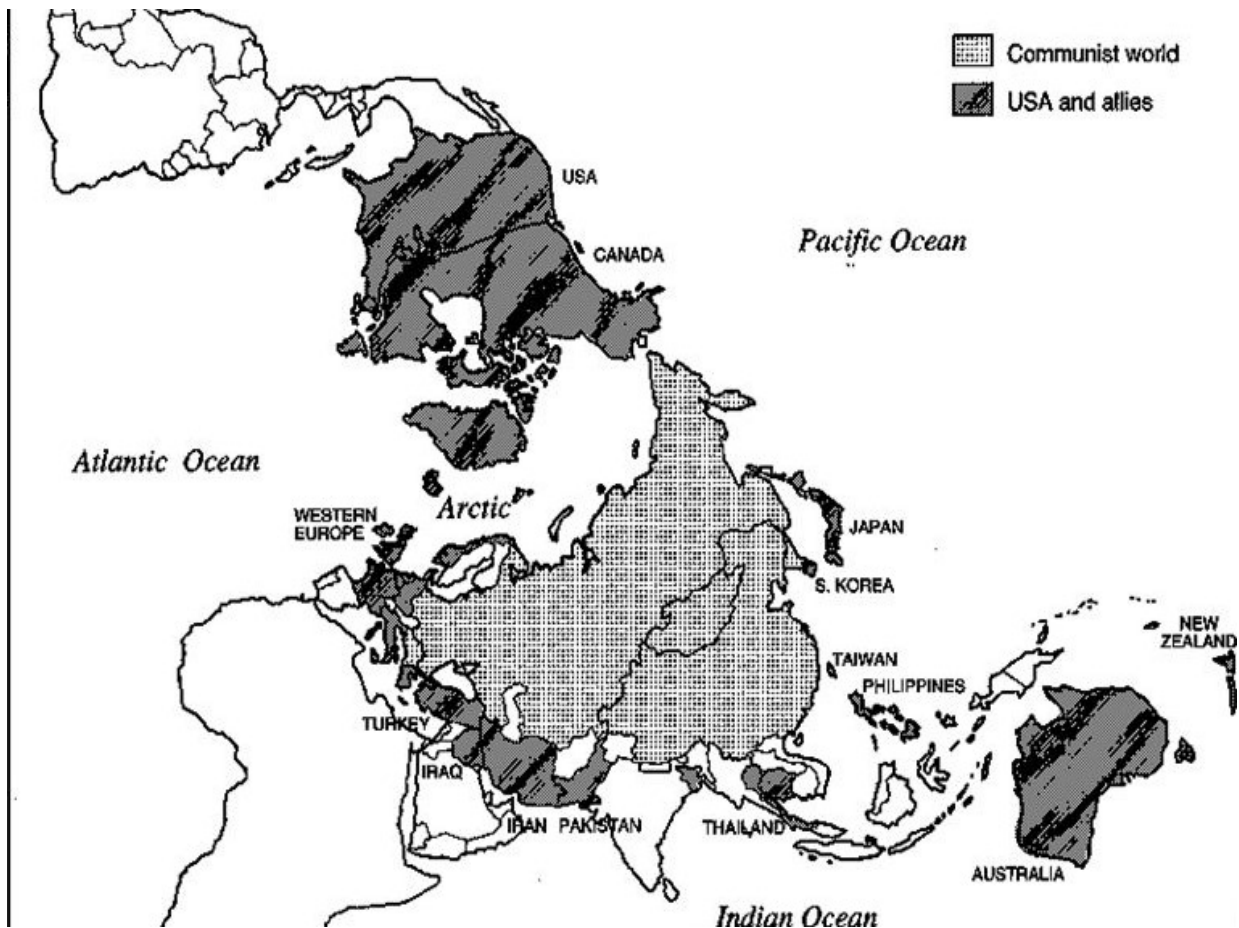


Fig. 3: Greece as a part of the coastal Rimland of democratic states containing the continental Eurasian core of totalitarian states

Greek membership in NATO proved to be a major source for security for the still militarily weak Greek state in the early Cold War period. Greek membership in NATO contributed to the significant upgrade of installations and army capabilities and acquisition of new dogma parameters leading to the significant modernization of the Hellenic Army.⁹ The post-war Hellenic Army embarked on a path of modernization that over the decades would lead to its current ranking as one of the most powerful armies, especially concerning its air force, in Europe. Initially, in the 1950s and 1960s Greece due to its inadequate economic structure remained dependent to a considerable degree on foreign military aid in order to present a

⁹ Dionysios Chourchoulis & Lykourgos Kourkouvelas, 'Greek Perceptions of NATO during the Cold War', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 12, no. 4, 2012, pp. 497-514.

reliable army as both a containing and an averting factor considering its northern Communist neighbors.¹⁰

In the early period of its NATO membership, Greece also received substantial support from the United States via the Mutual Defence Assistance Programme. Over the years, Greece upgraded its military forces both with the assistance of the US and in the context of the NATO alliance. Greece's air force was modernised in the early 1950s and contributed to NATO's Sixth Allied Tactical Air Force established in October 1953 being NATO's easternmost air headquarters and projecting power in strategic areas in the vicinity of the Soviet Union. NATO's Sixth Allied Tactical Air Force was supported by the Royal Hellenic 28th Tactical Air Force of the Greek Air Force and the Turkish 1st, 2nd and 3rd Tactical Air Forces. Greece became a part of the NATO Air Defence Ground Environment (NADGE) programme, an advanced network comprising of a chain of stations throughout NATO territory and providing capabilities of detection, identification and interception of enemy aircraft and finally elimination of aerial military threats in the NATO European airspace.

The fundamental NATO doctrine during the early phase of the Cold War (1949-1962) was the concept of *massive retaliation*, comprising the military use by a state or an alliance of states of a force disproportionate to the size of the initial attack from an external aggressor.¹¹ In this way massive retaliation would deter a possible external aggressor from initially attacking at all. In the case of Greece, this effectively meant that NATO would protect Greek sovereignty from any potential attacks from the northern Socialist states, especially neighboring Bulgaria which held a highly mechanized army, and any attack on Greek borders would be considered as a *casus belli* for the NATO alliance. The doctrine proved to be successful for a period, as the countries of the Eastern Bloc did not possess the ability to inflict a second strike during the 1950s. The Warsaw Pact had prepared invasion plans concerning frontier states of the Alliance, such as Greece, Italy, Germany and Denmark. Declassified files originating from the Warsaw Pact military

¹⁰ NAC memoranda, 'Second Report on the Annual Review Part I', NATO Archives, CM (53) 35, 15 April 1954; Annual Review 1953: Country Chapter on Greece, CM (53) 150, Part III, 24 November 1953.

¹¹ Samuel F. Wells Jr., 'The Origins of Massive Retaliation', *Political Science Quarterly* 96, no. 1, Spring 1981, pp. 31-52.

planning and intercepted by the CIA contain cartographic depictions of the invasion plans of the Communist bloc against Greece.

In the late 1970s Greece gradually reoriented itself towards the European Communities, the predecessor of the European Union. During this period and especially after the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus and its short-sighted withdrawal from the military wing of NATO, Greece tended to perceive its membership in the European Communities achieved in 1979 as a possible complementary institutional framework to NATO or even as a viable substitute of the latter. In this context, Greek political elites clearly overestimated the prospect of the European states creating a possible future military dimension to their socio-economic project of European integration.¹² This perception of the European institutions as a substitute of NATO was not realistic given the complementary nature of NATO to European security concerns and the incomplete, if not hesitant, approach of the EU regarding its defense parameter.

The dissolution of the Eastern Bloc in 1989 and the Soviet Union in 1991, the outbreak of the Yugoslav Civil War (1991-1995) and the subsequent turmoil in the Balkans -Greece's northern hinterland- provided Greece with a large strategic advantage in the long term thanks to its embedded Western strategic orientation and affiliations. Greece became overnight the strongest and most advanced state in the Balkan region using its NATO and EU membership as a comparative advantage. Over the next years, Greece continued to enjoy this strategic preponderance over its northern neighbors, in a definitive change of the geopolitical landscape of the previous decades that would enable the country to project its influence in the greater Mediterranean region in later periods.

In the early 21st century, Greece continued to bolster its strategic ties to both the continental European Union economic power core and the Euro-Atlantic NATO military power core, effectively balancing its geopolitical orientation. Greece is also the closest-lying European state to both Egypt and Libya, a fact demonstrating its Mediterranean maritime orientation in addition to its European one.

¹² Sotiris Rizas, 'Atlantism and Europeanism in Greek Foreign and Security Policy in the 1970s', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 8, no. 1, 2008, pp. 51-66.



Fig. 4: NATO troops in Greece during military exercises



Fig. 5: Installations of NATO Air Defense Ground Environment in Greece

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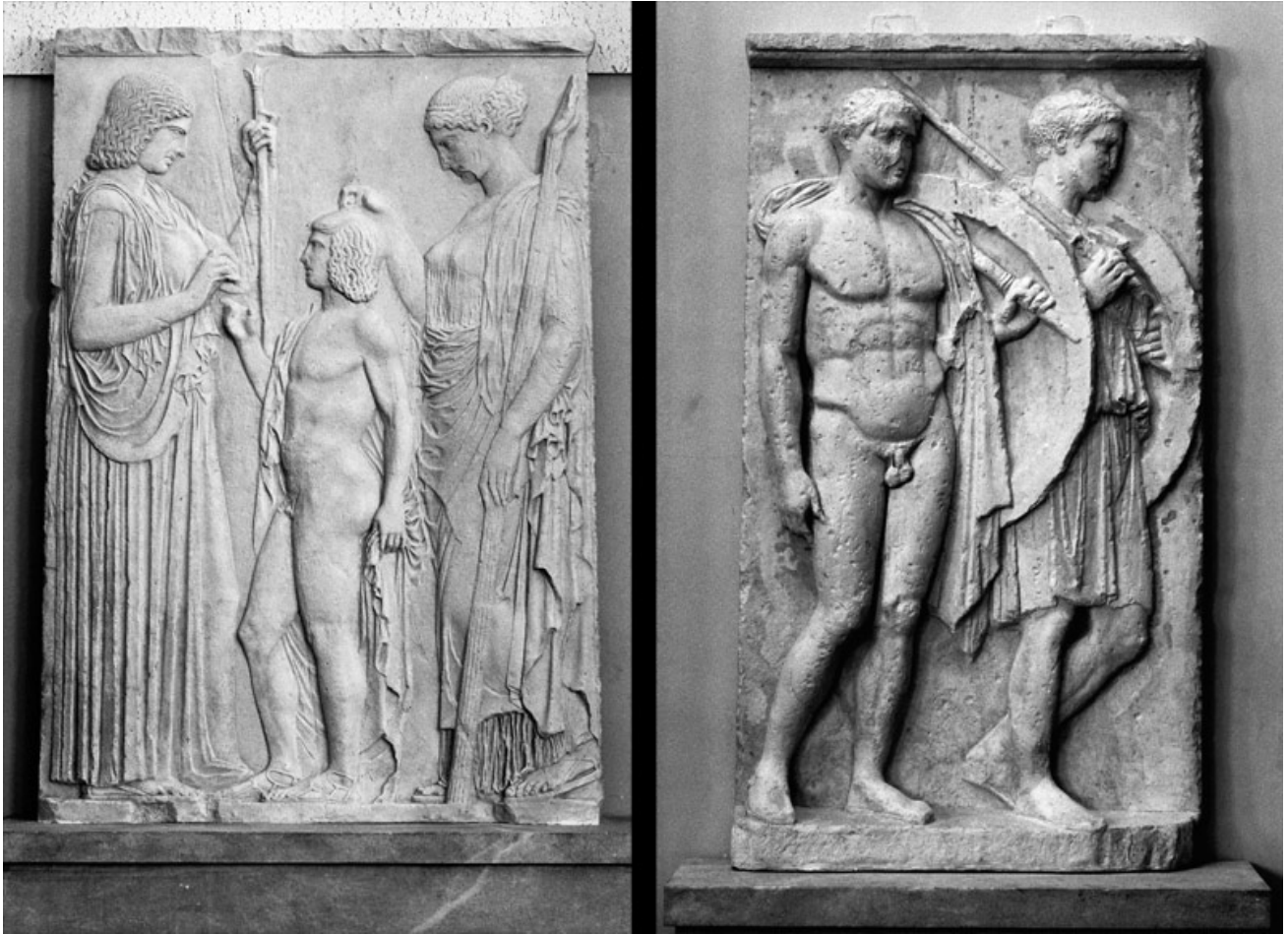


Fig. 6: The two bas-reliefs donated by the Greek government in March 1962 -on the 10-year anniversary of Greece's NATO membership- to adorn the new NATO Headquarters at Porte Dauphine, Paris. On the left, the bas-relief represents Demeter offering ears of wheat to Triptolemos, son of the Eleusinian king Keleos, to bestow on mankind, while Persephone blesses him; the original dates to 440-430 BC. On the right, the tombstone of Chaeredemos and Lykeas is depicted. Chaeredemos and Lykeas were two young soldiers who died in combat in the Peloponnesian War; the original dates back to the second half of the 5th century BC.



Fig. 7: NATO airplanes over the Acropolis in Athens



Fig. 8: Post stamps issued on the 10-year anniversary of Greece's membership in NATO in 1962

2. Current Challenges for NATO and Greece

Today, NATO as a collective security framework of Western democracies in the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical region faces considerable challenges in the years and decades ahead caused mainly by the revisionist autarchic powers of Eurasia: Russia's invasion of Ukraine,¹³ the revisionist attempts of Russia to undermine the independence of post-Soviet states in its periphery, Russian incursions in the Mediterranean through Syria and in the continent of Africa, and Chinese economic and diplomatic expansion in Eurasia. NATO needs to reaffirm both its internal cohesion and outward dynamics on a regional and a global level with carefully studied synergies connecting overlapping regional networks of cooperation, like AUKUS and the Five Eyes intelligence sharing network. The Russian invasion of Ukraine with its second phase unfolding in 2022 has revived the unity of NATO and the urgent necessity of maintain a reliable military force, leading also to the enlargement of the spatial area of the Alliance with the forthcoming inclusion of two focal Scandinavian states with advanced militaries, Finland and Sweden.¹⁴

In June 2022, NATO introduced its new Strategic Concept adapting to the new geopolitical environment created by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the volatile conditions in the greater Eurasian landmass.¹⁵ According to its new dogma, NATO defines the Russian Federation as the greatest security challenge to deal with in the coming period. According to the wording of the 2022 Strategic Concept "Moscow's military build-up, including in the Baltic, Black and Mediterranean Sea regions, along with its military integration with Belarus, challenge our security and interests". An additional region of elevated strategic interest according to the 2022 Strategic Concept is the Mediterranean Sea, Greece's area of vital interests: "NATO's southern neighborhood, particularly the Middle East, North

¹³ Ioannis E. Kotoulas & Wolfgang Puztai, *Geopolitics of the War in Ukraine*, Athens: Foreign Affairs Institute, 2022, <https://fainst.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Geopolitics-of-the-War-in-Ukraine-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁴ Ioannis E. Kotoulas, 'Russia as a Revisionist State and the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine', in: I. Ivanovych (ed.), *The Russian-Ukrainian War (2014-2022): Historical, Political, Cultural-Educational, Religious, Economic and Legal Aspects*, Riga: Baltija Publishing, 2022, 551-556, <http://baltijapublishing.lv/omp/index.php/bp/catalog/view/237/6285/13320-1>.

¹⁵ NATO (ed.), 'NATO 2022 Strategic Concept', https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf.

Africa and Sahel regions, faces interconnected security, demographic, economic and political challenges”.

As a member of the Mediterranean core of NATO’s periphery and as a member of both the EU and the East Med Gas Forum, Greece’s position is essential in promoting NATO interests and effective synergies over greater regions uniting Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Since the 2010s Greece has radically altered its self-perception as a geopolitical actor from a peripheral EU member-state tied to the Brussels bureaucratic core to a dynamic independent actor in the Mediterranean. The advent of an increasingly revisionist Turkey was the main external factor that caused Greece’s repositioning in the new unstable geopolitical environment of the Eastern Mediterranean. Since 2010, Greece actively projected power in the Eastern Mediterranean, the new advanced frontier zone of Greek national interests. In this context, Greece reinvented itself as a frontline state, this time oriented in the Mediterranean Sea. The maritime dimension of Greece’s geopolitical identity resurfaced, and Greece strengthened its ties to the U.S. and on a regional level to various states, such as Egypt, Israel, the UAE and France.¹⁶

In the 21st century Greece tends to perceive its strategic position as that of a frontier state of the Western Atlantic core in relation to the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, thus confirming its spatial maritime strategic orientation that has been a constant feature of its geopolitical character since its foundation in the early 19th century.¹⁷

On a purely military level, according to data of the Global Firepower Index Greece possesses the 17th strongest air force considering fighter jets and overall aircraft capabilities in the world (5th on a European level). Featuring 193 units, Greece controls the 2nd strongest air force in Europe in fighter jets after France and a considerable navy fleet ranking 5th in frigates and 10th in submarines globally. On a societal level, Greece is one of the few European countries with a standing mandatory military service (conscription) system and concerning active military

¹⁶ Ioannis E. Kotoulas, ‘India and Greece as Strategic Partners’, *Defence and Security Alert* 12:7 (4/2021), pp. 34-39, https://www.dsalert.org/DSA-Editions/April_2021_Dr._IOANNIS_E._KOTOULAS.pdf.

¹⁷ Ioannis E. Kotoulas, ‘Greece as a Frontline State in the Historical Long Durée’, *Journal of Military Studies* 10, 2021, pp. 1-8, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2478/jms-2021-0010>

personnel Greece ranks 3rd in Europe.¹⁸ Greece is currently upgrading its military arsenal applying 10 billion Euros over the next years having recently obtained 24 4.5-generation Dassault Rafale jets and 4 frigates. In June 2022 Greece sent an official request to the United States for the purchase of 20 Lockheed Martin-made F-35 fighter jets, with an option for 20 more. Planning indicates delivering of first F-35 jets in 2028, thus making Greek air force one of the most advanced in Europe and the Mediterranean.

Greece already acts as a forward base for the deployment of NATO troops in Eastern Europe through its ports located in its northern territory, in Salonica and the recently upgraded installations at Alexandroupoli. Greek airspace is the entry area for NATO forces operating in the Mediterranean and heading to Black Sea and Eastern Europe. The aeronautical Souda Bay base in Crete, the largest naval base in the Mediterranean, is the most effective US base in Europe and the Mediterranean in terms of potential output and could become a major hub for power projection towards both regions in Eurasia and Africa. The strategic importance of Crete -an island strategically situated close to the European mainland and in vicinity with North Africa- is essential. Crete could be upgraded to become the fundamental hub for both US and NATO power projection in multiple directions, towards the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel region.

Thus, Greece at the cross point of three continents, offers a unique geographical location for NATO operations. Greece could host the US nuclear missiles currently stationed in Incirlik Base of Turkey in the case their transport out of Turkish territory is considered a strategic move. Greece aspires to form a vital bridge between Europe, the states of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf. By upgrading its military forces and its ties to the U.S. Greece is poised to become once again a frontline state that can project power towards the Black Sea, Eastern Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia.

NATO can create regional frameworks of cooperation that shall include external amicable states and shall act as forward frontier NATO mechanisms. In the

¹⁸ Global Firepower Index, '2023 Greece Military Strength', updated 9/1/2023, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=greece.

Eastern Mediterranean two NATO members, France, and Greece, have already established patterns of military and economic cooperation through overlapping multilateral networks with Israel, Cyprus, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the UAE. Establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum and cooperation from the Mediterranean to the Gulf highlights an emerging new regional order uniting three major seas (Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, Gulf) and three continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa).

The issue of Cyprus can be reevaluated in the context of a possible membership for the Cyprus Republic in NATO. If Cyprus becomes a NATO member, as it should have done in the 1960s, then the overwhelming presence of Turkey in the northern, occupied part shall become a problem for the invading revisionist part, i.e. Turkey. Although, Cyprus' NATO membership is a complicated issue, policy planners in both Cyprus and Greece should focus on this prospect and coordinate their actions on promoting the ties of Cyprus to NATO, to the US in the context of a renewed presence of Hellenism in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Using reliable member-states, as Greece, and potential partners, such as Egypt, and Israel, as focal points of outward power projection, NATO can evolve and effectively combat the increased Russian interference from Libya to Syria and the Balkans. NATO can remain a meaningful framework of safety and deterrence against Russian influence and the rise of China in Eurasia and in Africa, new mentalities should be developed and a whole new perception of NATO's spatial mission. NATO should be able to keep a reliable presence over an extended geographical area from the Arctic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea and the coasts of Africa.

The Greek Foreign Ministry has articulated its foreign policy priorities in the context of the Alliance as follows:

1. the shaping of a more functional relationship between the Alliance and the European Union as the latter's Common Security and Defense Policy develops further,
2. the strengthening of NATO-UN dialogue and cooperation, and

3. the endeavor of consolidating stability in the Alliance's southern wing through the establishment of a more constructive partnership between the Alliance and the countries of the Middle East and North Africa.

Seven decades of membership in NATO have guaranteed Greek sovereignty and inclusion in the Western hard core of power and in a union of democracies, that promotes international stability and regional balance. The future is full of challenges in the periphery of NATO in Eastern Europe, North Africa and the Mediterranean that need to be addressed in the framework of the Alliance with respect to the principles of international law. Greece is a staunch and dedicated member of the NATO alliance, committed to the values enshrined in NATO's founding Treaty, and with its advanced military power able to contribute decisively to the Alliance's various missions and operations and its new energetic role as a safeguarding network of democracy and Western interests on a global level._



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