The New Realities for Greek Foreign Policy

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Throughout the period of Papandreou's government that lasted almost a decade, a number of traditional, economic and geopolitical factors and some new ideological impulses shaped Greece's foreign policy. Among the geopolitical and economic factors, we must note the secular fears of Turkey and Turkey's strength and “interest” in the Aegean. These fears were, of course, only aggravated, and rightly so, by the division of Cyprus after the invasion of the island in August of 1974. Among the economic factors we note (even while Greece was negotiating to enter the Common Market and after it joined in 1981), the particular trade interests of Greece in the Arab world and, in general, the good relations with what Papandreou called the “Arab nation,” as evidenced by the number of Greeks working and living in various Arab countries. The “new” ideological impulse — socialism and anti-imperialism — was translated into an anti-American posture, since Marxists decreed that the United States was the bastion and the spearhead of world-wide capitalism. Connected with anti-Americanism was, of course, an anti-Israeli (if not anti-semitic) posture prevalent, alas, in the Greek culture and strengthened by the belief that Israel was “the lance” of American capitalism in the Middle East.

All these elements that made up Greek foreign policy somehow fell into place because of the US-USSR rivalry. The Soviets made every effort, through their client states, to maintain a foothold in the Arab world, to support the PLO, to arm Iraq (but others did too!) and, of course, to press for an international conference to resolve the status of the Palestinians in the occupied territories in favor of Palestinian autonomy. Greece, a member of the European Community, deeply in need of economic assistance from it, and a member of NATO and deeply beholden to the USA for military and economic support, found it difficult to reconcile the various forces surrounding it and, at the same time, to develop a foreign policy consistent with its long-range interests. For a time, playing the Soviets against the USA proved lucrative to the governing elites, not so much because they really believed that they could replace American aid with Soviet aid, but simply because they were able to maintain a high level of American and Western support by pretending that they would! Ideological slogans satisfied the PASOK rank and file, but membership in NATO and the continuation of the US bases provided for the security needed and for the aid required both from the Common Market and the United States. For almost ten years, Papandreou mesmerized his European and American providers simply by threatening to abandon them! His tactics worked up to a certain point. But tactics cannot work for long unless they are based upon a solid foreign policy strategy — and there was none!

Although there is no guarantee about the future, three major developments have taken place in the last few years and some in the last few months. First, the Soviet strength has been weakened — severely and for a long time. The Warsaw Pact, of which Romania and Bulgaria were members, is no more, and within the Soviet Union, ethnic rivalries and independence movements stalk the Soviet leadership. From an economic point of view, the USSR needs help — perhaps even more than Greece — and the place to get it is in the West, the USA and Japan. A new spirit of friendly cooperation and growing economic and trade relations and investments in East Europe and perhaps soon in the USSR, has replaced what was left of the Cold War. Greece can derive no benefits, therefore, from exploiting US-USSR rivalry simply because there is none at present.

The second major development is associated with the events of the Gulf War. First, the “Arab nation” became divided into neutral states, belligerent states, an occupied and annexed state, and, as it was the case with Jordan, a...
friendly non-belligerent state. Iraq was destroyed and this has left the Soviets only one client state — Syria, for which restraint is now the only possible course of action. For the time being, therefore, it is hard to see Greece continue a pro-Arab stance, other than maintaining its commercial relations and capitalizing perhaps on whatever goodwill it enjoys in the whole area. But overt links with the Kaddafi or the PLO will not pay off. It would be better if the Greeks would let the Palestinian issue be decided by those who have weight in the region and abandon all ideological pronouncements for the time being. The biggest players in the area are bound to be the Saudis, the USA, the Egyptians, Turkey, Syria, the European Community and the Soviet Union. Let them handle the issue while Greece maintains its good-neighbor relations and interests and improves its ties with all and with Israel. A great amount of help and technical aid can come from Israel, and it would be a mistake to eschew it for the sake of symbolic pronouncements about an issue over which Greece has no role to play and no weight to bear.

The third development, or rather developments, relate, of course, to the centerpiece of Greece's geopolitical concerns and fears — Turkey. Its role in the Gulf War has improved its image both in the United States and the West. Turkey provided help with restraint. At a given time, its willingness to allow planes to operate from its territory against Iraq was considered of critical importance. It also provided, indirectly, help to Israel in the identification and destruction of Scud missiles operating from Western Iraq. No serious terrorist acts were committed, and whatever the position of the Turkish military, democracy and civilian rule were not challenged. There is little doubt that Turkey will receive aid from the USA exceeding the 7 to 10 ratio and that its military force will grow. But will it be directed towards the Aegean or will it be needed for the Middle East? The Kurds, the Iraqis, the Syrians, the Armenians and the state of Lebanon may well preoccupy the Turks far more than the Aegean. Furthermore, it should be remembered that they wish to join the European Community. Already about 800 million dollars has been promised to them by the European commission to modernize their economy. Greece has a veto both over the disbursement of this grail and, ultimately, over Turkish membership. What is to be done?

There are two possible answers: one is that Greece maintains its intransigence, vis-a-vis Turkey, until the Cyprus issue is settled and unless Greece continues to receive military aid from the USA on the basis of the 7 to 10 ratio. In doing so, it may antagonize the Common Market, the USA and Turkey and may also lose the some 1.8 billion dollars of aid the European Community has earmarked for the modernization of Greece — three times as much as was promised to Turkey. It will antagonize them all without securing help and support from elsewhere. The second answer is quite clear and in accord with the new world-wide developments — that Greece must now accept! Economically and commercially, there is every reason for new links to be forged between Greece and Turkey; politically, the best guarantee against Turkey is not to be found in military defense, but in a re-emphasis on NATO. It is hard, after what happened with Kuwait, to believe that Turkey will commit an act of aggression against Greece without arousing the fury of the international community and the United Nations Security Council; politically, the best guarantee for a democratic Turkey lies in its membership in the European Community. Instead of thwarting it, Greece should make every effort to facilitate it. To be sure, Cyprus and ethnic Turkish minorities in Thrace will remain problem areas, but in a context of renewed cooperation and mutual confidence, they are not likely to be insurmountable.

Small powers live with what they have; their stature grows with their ability to improve their relatively small assets rather than waste them on unattainable pursuits. The time is for Greece — without Papandreou — to align its vocabulary and aspirations on its interests, i.e., the security and prosperity of the Greek people. "Our cup is small but we shall drink from our cup," General De Gaulle said about France. Alas, the cup of Greece is smaller than that of France and cannot be replenished without the help of others. The time has come for mutual aid and cooperation — with Turkey, Israel, the Arab world, the Balkans, and, needless to say, the European Community and the USA.