



Weekly Briefing

**Greece External Relations briefing:
Developments in Greek Foreign Policy
George N. Tzogopoulos**

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Developments in Greek Foreign Policy

February 2018 has been a particularly turbulent month for Greek foreign policy. There are two main issues which are dominating the agenda. The first is the evolution of Greek-Turkish relations. And the second the ongoing process for finding a mutually accepted solution with FYROM for its erga omnes name usage under the UN aegis. Starting with Greek-Turkish relations, Athens is particularly concerned with recent Ankara's tactics. In particular, on 12 February a Turkish patrol boat rammed a Greek coast guard vessel that was anchored off the island of Imia in the Aegean. The incident did not cause injuries but damaged the stern of the Greek vessel.

Following the Imia serious incident the Secretary General of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Dimitrios Paraskevopoulos, made a strong demarche to his Turkish counterpart. Furthermore, the Director General for Political Affairs summoned Turkey's Ambassador in Athens to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to the Greek official position, 'dangerous incidents such as [the recent Imia one], which place human lives at risk, are the result of the escalating and provocative conduct that Turkey has increasingly exhibited'. Greece has subsequently called upon Turkey to stop violating international law and refrain from acts that do not contribute to the development of relations between the two countries as they undermine regional security and stability.

Greek-Turkish relations have been relatively stable during the years of Recep Tayyip Erdogan but recent developments are certainly not encouraging. Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias warned Ankara that the next time it acts with such aggression Greece would not have the same peaceful behavior. In his specific words: '[Turkey] reached the red line and in some ways 'it' crossed it'. Government Spokesman Dimitris Tzanakopoulos also warned Turkey in the aftermath of the Imia incident that Greece would respond to any further acts of

aggression. From its part Ankara has ‘explicitly’ told Greece that refraining from tensions would be ‘better’ for bilateral ties. This view was expressed by its Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım. Spokesperson of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Alexandros Yennimatas responded that ‘along with any sense of measure, Turkey has lost its common sense’. And he reiterated the Greek position that Turkey was violating international law.

The reaction of the EU has been in favor of Greece but rather mild. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said he was ‘strictly against the behavior of Turkey. EU words have not been followed by practice though. As in most important foreign policy issues Europe prefers not to become involved in protecting one of its member-states. Europe’s inertia becomes even more straightforward taking into account that Greek daily Kathimerini newspaper revealed a video showing the moment when the Turkish patrol boat Umut rammed the Greek Coast Guard vessel around Imia. Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and his Turkish counterpart Yildirim agreed to de-escalate tensions but Turkish forces remained in the vicinity of the Imia islets which it calls Kardak.

Beyond the Imia incident, Turkey was recently active in violating the Exclusive Economic Zone of Cyprus. Considering this as ‘provocative conduct’ Greece called upon Turkey to desist from further unlawful actions and comply with its obligations stemming from international law. According to Turkish Energy Minister, Berak Albayra, his country would be determined to block an offshore hydrocarbon search until there would be an accord to reunify Cyprus. Turkish warships went further as they harassed the surveying vessel of Italian oil company ENI and threatened to sink it in the Exclusive Economic Zone of Cyprus. The Italian ship was forced to make the necessary maneuvers in order to avoid a collision.

As it also happened in the case of the Imia incident, the EU was keen on supporting Greece in theory. German Chancellor Angela Merkel reportedly told Tsipras that Berlin’s support was clear and self-evident. Nonetheless, it is

important to mention that the US is carefully monitoring the situation. US Ambassador to Athens Geoffrey Pyatt publicly expressed his concern over the possibility of an ‘accident’ happening between Greece and Turkey in the Aegean following either the Imia disagreement or Turkish stance in the Exclusive Economic Zone of Cyprus. On 20 February the Turkish navy extended through March 10 its Navtex notice of military activity off Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean.

With reference to the negotiations between Greece and FYROM on the erga omnes name usage of the latter, the two sides are continuing their efforts under the UN aegis. On 13 February, for instance, Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary-General, Matthew Nimetz, met jointly with Kotzias and his counterpart from FYROM, Nikola Dimitrov, at the UN Office in Vienna. FYROM is seeking EU and NATO membership but it cannot succeed as long as it does not agree with Greece on its erga omnes name. Both the EU (both Brussels and Berlin) and the US are welcoming the progress made and the good climate but the road ahead is not easy as FYROM needs to change its constitutional name to proceed. For this to happen, the country should alter its Constitution. As a matter of principle Greece is supporting the transatlantic orientation of FYROM. Alternate Minister of Foreign Affairs, Giorgos Katrougalos, for example, sent recently a letter to Enlargement Commissioner, Johannes Hahn, and Regional Policy Commissioner, Corina Crețu, informing of Greece’s intention to support FYROM’s candidacy within the framework of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR).

The main reason why both the EU and the US are interested in promoting FYROM’s EU and NATO membership is that they have been alarmed by Russian active engagement in the Western Balkans region. Although the EU enlargement seems to be practically out of the agenda, this does not apply to the accession of new states to NATO. The recent accession of Montenegro was informative. In order to continue with the enlargement of the North Atlantic Alliance, FYROM’s adhesion is placed in placed within the American interest-

if a mutually acceptable solution of the name issue is found under the auspices of the UN.

At a first glance, Russian interests are served by ongoing demonstrations in Greece against a potential solution of the name issue. The negative stance of the Greek public opinion could prevent the Greek government from agreeing with FYROM. Should this happens, FYROM will fail to accept invitation to join NATO in the near future. China is not interfering in that regard. As a matter of principle, it is only interested in seeing the problem be solved under the aegis of the UN in order to ensure stability and a smooth implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Balkan Peninsula. Last year's political instability in FYROM naturally created deep concern in Beijing.

With regard to the NATO summit to be held this summer, Greece has the upper hand. The policy of the Kostas Karamanlis government in April 2008 in the NATO Bucharest summit resulted in FYROM not being able to receive a formal invitation unless a mutually acceptable solution of the name issue under the auspices of the UN is found. The agreement reached in Bucharest eight years ago can overrides the Interim Accord signed between Greece and FYROM in 1995. So, if there is no solution of the name issue, FYROM - instead of a formal invitation to join – FYROM will be proposed a different type of cooperation. Perhaps the model of Sweden could be replicated or adjusted.

The fact that Greece has the upper hand does not mean that it its national interest is necessarily served with FYROM being outside NATO. Greece is not looking at the role of Russia in the Western Balkans but that of Turkey. In recent years, Ankara – under the leadership of Erdogan – has increased its economic presence in FYROM and is trying to serve its interests at the expense of Greece. This Turkish policy deserves particular attention as it might be strengthened should instability returns to FYROM. Since the emergence of the Athens-Skopje name dispute over the name issue, Ankara was quick in recognizing FYROM with its constitutional name. At the same time, it firmly pushes for references in NATO documents using the term 'Republic of Macedonia.'

In recent years, former Prime Minister of FYROM, Nikola Gruevski, and Erdogan – either as Prime Minister or as President of Turkey – developed an excellent degree of cooperation. New Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, is following the same paradigm. Zaev recently went to Ankara (12 February) where he enjoyed the full support of the Turkish government. Yildirim went as far as to urge the Greek government not to try to impose to ‘Macedonia’ how it should be called. The climate was equally warm during the meeting between President of FYROM, Gjorge Ivanov, and Erdogan (20 February). Even on this occasion Erdogan supported the position of the FYROM in its ongoing name dispute with Greece. It is evident the axis between FYROM and Turkey is causing a serious trouble to Greece.