






Weekly Briefing

**Greece External Relations briefing:
June 2018: A critical month for 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

June 2018: A critical month for Greek foreign policy

On 17 June 2018 Greece signed an agreement with FYROM on the name dispute. The new and final erga omnes name of the latter will be North Macedonia. Should all pre-requisites are met, Greece will not any longer pose any obstacles in the attempt of FYROM to enter NATO and the EU. Following this important accord, the main attention of Greece is being turned towards bilateral differences with Albania. In the meanwhile, Erdogan's victory in the Turkish general elections of 24 June 2018 are posing questions for the day after while Sino-Greek relations are being steadily improved.

White Smoke with FYROM

June is a significant month for Greek foreign policy. Despite the negative international environment regarding the fundamental Greek position for an erga omnes solution on the name issue with FYROM, the Greek government has succeeded to achieve this in its negotiations with the neighboring country under the UN auspices. Their agreement, which is final and terminates the interim accord of 1995, stipulates that the official name of FYROM shall be 'the Republic of North Macedonia' (or North Macedonia) and shall be used erga omnes. This means all regional and international organizations as well as UN countries, which in the past had recognized FYROM with its constitutional name, will now use the term North Macedonia. FYROM also commits to amend its constitution and consider this internal procedure as 'binding and irrevocable'. The agreement will take effect after FYROM ratifies it (the recent parliamentary approval will be followed by a referendum) and after constitutional amendments are concluded by the end of 2018. Then Greece will also have to ratify it.

Upon entry into force of the agreement Greece will support the future membership of FYROM with its new and final name North Macedonia in both

NATO and the EU. This will mark the official end of Greece's objection to the Euro-Atlantic course of the neighboring country as it was outlined during the NATO Bucharest 2008 Summit. At that time Athens had achieved to persuade its partners to consider the solution of the name issue with FYROM under the UN umbrella a necessary pre-requisite for FYROM to receive an official invitation. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that Greece is still having the possibility to exert a veto in the case it regards it necessary at both the NATO and the EU level. The recent agreement does not abolish this right during the pre-accession period.

In order to reach a compromise with FYROM and give the opportunity to the Prime Minister Zoran Zaev to sell the accord domestically, Greece had to make a significant concession. That is because – according to the agreement – the nationality of FYROM shall be Macedonian/citizen of North Macedonia and its official language will be called Macedonian language. Although the accord acknowledges that Athens and Skopje understand that the terms 'Macedonia' and 'Macedonian' refer to a different historical context, Athens is not satisfied by accepting this. Nevertheless, this is a minor issue in comparison to the excellent Greek diplomatic success of pushing FYROM to change its constitutional name and proceed with constitutional amendments. Furthermore, the potential adhesion of FYROM to the EU will put a brake to the influential role Turkey is playing in this country.

Next destination: Albania

In the wake of the agreement with FYROM on the name dispute, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias is aiming at resolving differences with Albania. Expressing his optimism after a meeting with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on 13 June he said he would solve pending differences 'before the holiday period'. Specifically, Athens and Tirana are attempting to sign a deal which will cover thorny issues such as the demarcation the Exclusive Economic Zones of the two countries, the abolishment of the status of war that is still in

effect since WWII, the respect of the rights of ethnic Greeks in Albania and necessary changes in school textbooks. However, the Greek government is categorically denying the issue of the Chams – who believe they have a right to the property they left in Greece when they were expelled during World War II – will be included.

On 22 June Ktzias met in Rhodes with his Albanian counterpart Ditmir Bushati on the occasion of the Third Conference for Security and Stability. Greece has been keen on supporting Albanian positions in the EU as the Greek Foreign Minister clarified on the Greek island. Although EU foreign ministers postponed the opening of accession negotiations with Albania (and FYROM) a few days later (on 25 June) due to objections mainly by France and the Netherlands, Ktzias remains a warm supporter. His argumentation is grounded on the geopolitical and geostrategic situation in the region which ‘necessitates assistance rather than postponement’ in his own words. He believes Albania should not be left behind because its distance from Serbia will grow in such a case and this will not be a positive development for the Balkan region.

The elections in Turkey

Following a few months of tensions in Greek-Turkish relations the triumph of President Tayip Erdogan and his AKP party in the elections of 24 June means the Turkish leadership will stay in power for the years to come. This ‘business as usual’ situation poses a dilemma for the Greek government: will Ankara prefer calmness in Greek-Turkish relations as it was happening for a long period under Erdogan before the recent phase of tensions or will it continue the policy of provocations of the last months? At the time of writing it is particularly difficult to offer an answer to this question. Although Erdogan had in the past favored a policy of limited or controllable problems with Greece, his interest in natural gas discoveries in the Exclusive Economic Zone of Cyprus makes the future of Greek-Turkish rather obscure.

After the victory of Erdogan and his AKP party was announced, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras congratulated him. In parallel with that – as Tsipras’ office stated – he called for the immediate release of the two Greek soldiers who have been detained since early March. A few days before the Turkish election, a court in the northwestern Turkish province of Edirne rejected for the fourth time an appeal to release them from pre-trial detention. No official charges have been filed against them and no date has been set for their trial though. Beyond this important theme, Tsipras and Erdogan discussed the bilateral cooperation on migration as Ankara did at the beginning of June announce its intention to suspend a relevant agreement signed in 2001. The two leaders are expected to meet in Brussels on the sidelines of the next NATO summit on 11 and 12 July.

Sino-Greek relations to further improve

Relations between Greece and China are continuously improving following the privatization of the Piraeus Port Authority. In mid-June the speaker of the Greek Parliament Nikos Voutsis visited Beijing where he met China’s top legislator Li Zhanshu and Vice President Wang Qishan. According to Xinhua news agency Li said China’s National People’s Congress is willing to cooperate more with the Greek Parliament to create a better legal and social environment for building the Belt and Road and to promote the Sino-Greek comprehensive strategic partnership. For his part, Voutsis appreciated China’s rapid development and underlined Greece’s determination to actively participate in the Belt and Road Initiative. Also, Vice President Wang explained both sides understand and respect each other’s core interests and major concerns and Voutsis agreed with this perspective and elaborated on the significance of a closer cooperation between China and the EU on regional stability and economic globalization.

Within the framework of the improvement of Sino-Greek relations an important business deal was recently reached. The Greek Copelouzos Group and

China Energy are joining efforts to collaborate on energy projects. The two sides will give a press conference on 5 July. Chairman of Copelouzos Group Mr Dimitrios Copelouzos and his counterpart of China Energy Dr Ling Wen will elaborate on the details of this business deal. Last year, Copelouzos Group had also signed an agreement with Shenhua Group on the cooperation and development of the green energy sector and the environmental upgrading of energy generating units in Greece and other countries.

A diplomatic success to be remembered

June 2018 is a month full with news and developments in Greek foreign policy. Relations with Albania, China and Turkey have been on the agenda. However, the agreement with FYROM on the name issue is having the lion's share. Both Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias deserve a credit for solving a problem lasting for years and largely defending the Greek national interest. Kotzias is right in arguing that this agreement is 'the best news in Europe in five years'. It is not surprising that international media extensively covered this story. Foreign Policy magazine went further by suggesting that Tsipras deserves the Nobel Prize. Even if this title is exaggerated, accords as the one signed between Greece and FYROM on 17 June are only contributing to stability. This is certainly applicable in the Balkan region which did seriously suffer by bloodshed in the past. .