




# Weekly Briefing

**Greece external relations briefing:  
The Greek-American Partnership  
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## The Greek-American Partnership

*President Joe Biden is an experienced politician who is familiar with Eastern Mediterranean dynamics. His experience could be perhaps helpful for Greece which expects more support from the US in the management of its differences with Turkey. Greek-American relations did impressively evolve during the years of Donald Trump. This trend will likely be reinforced in the coming years. What deserves particular attention, however, is that while Athens counts on Washington in the hope to restrain Ankara's role in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, Washington approaches the region aiming at building partnerships against Russia and China. It is expected that the US will act to preserve Turkey in the Western orbit in spite of existing disagreements between the two countries. Greece can either collaborate with the US in that regard or just expect that the strengthening of Greek-American ties will magically alter Turkish behavior.*

The Donald Trump years witnessed an improvement in Greek-American relations. The current Prime Minister of Greece Kyriakos Mitsotakis and his predecessor Alexis Tsipras visited the White House in January 2020 and October 2017 respectively. Additionally, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo came two times to Greece. In his first visit in October 2019 he co-signed with his Greek counterpart Nikos Dendias the protocol of amendment to the Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement (MDCA). In the second one in October 2020, he went to Thessaloniki and Crete. The visit in Crete, in particular, outlined the importance the US attributes to the Souda naval base. As Pompeo said in the joint press conference with Mitsotakis, he was in Crete 'to showcase one of America's strongest military relationships throughout all of Europe' looking to Greece 'as a true pillar for stability and prosperity in the Eastern Mediterranean'.<sup>1</sup>

The bilateral strategic dialogue is a key instrument that further promotes Greek-American relations. It encompasses different sectors: regional cooperation, defense and security, law

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of State website, Secretary Michael R. Pompeo and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis Joint Press Statements after Their Meeting, available at: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-greek-prime-minister-kyriakos-mitsotakis-joint-press-statements-after-their-meeting/index.html>, 29 September 2020.

enforcement and counterterrorism, trade and investment, energy, and people-to-people ties.<sup>2</sup> Two rounds of the bilateral strategic dialogue have been already completed, while the third one is expected to take place throughout this year. What, among other things, deserves attention is the interest of the US in activating its International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) in Greece. The DFC was created by the US Congress as a tool to push back against American great power rivals.<sup>3</sup> In a February 2021 interview Minister of Development and Investment Adonis Georgiadis thanked DFC ‘for the strong decision to participate in port tenders’.<sup>4</sup> He referred to the port of Alexandroupolis and Kavala as well as Elefsis shipyards.

The Joe Biden presidency will likely further cement the Greek-American partnership. During the pre-election campaign Biden had promised to work with US ‘close ally Greece to advance stability in the eastern Mediterranean’.<sup>5</sup> He also pledged to ‘call out Turkish behavior that is in violation of international law or that contravenes its commitments as a NATO ally, such as Turkish violations of Greek airspace’.<sup>6</sup> It should be, however, mentioned that a few months ago the State Department was not able to provide a full list of confirmed violations of Greece’s airspace by Turkish fighter jets after 1 January 2017 due to a lack of consensus on the breadth of Greek national airspace.<sup>7</sup>

Nikos Dendias and the new Secretary of State Anthony Blinken held a telephone conversation on 15 February 2021. They emphasized their commitment to further strengthening bilateral relations, including through the strategic dialogue format and the 3+1 process with Cyprus and Israel, while Blinken welcomed Greece’s sustained leadership in advancing the transatlantic and European integration of the Western Balkans as it was showcased with the signing the Prespes Agreement.<sup>8</sup> Looking towards the future, the Greek Minister of Foreign

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Greece website, Joint Statement Regarding the High-Level Review of the U.S.-Greece Strategic Dialogue, available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/joint-statement-regarding-the-high-level-review-of-the-us-greece-strategic-dialogue.html>, 28 September 2020.

<sup>3</sup> See the interview of Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/interviews/253432/us-ready-to-invest-in-greece-pyatt-tells-kathimerini/>, 7 June 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Listen to the interview of Adonis Georgiadis at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/interviews/253432/us-ready-to-invest-in-greece-pyatt-tells-kathimerini/>, 18 February 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Greekcitytimes website, ‘US Presidential Candidate Joe Biden Presents Vision for Greece’, available at: <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/10/16/us-presidential-candidate-joe-biden-presents-vision-for-greece/>, 16 October 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *Kathimerini* English edition website, ‘No Consensus on Extent of Greek Airspace, State Department Report Says’, available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/259030/no-consensus-on-extent-of-greek-airspace-state-department-report-says/>, 11 November 2020.

<sup>8</sup> US Embassy in Greece website, ‘Secretary Blinken’s Call with Greek Foreign Minister Dendias’, available at: <https://gr.usembassy.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-greek-foreign-minister-dendias/>, 17 February 2021.

Affairs considered it significant for Greece and the US to update their MDCA.<sup>9</sup> According to Greek media reports, talks concentrate on the duration of the MDCA and the usage of new military bases.<sup>10</sup> In the interim, Greece is exploring offers to modernize the fleet of its navy including the American proposal for Multi-Mission Surface Combatant (MMSC) ships.<sup>11</sup>

While Greek-American relations are progressing, Greece's interest is to create a security umbrella that will protect it against Turkish actions in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece hopes that the excellent status of its relation with the US will play a catalytic role in restraining Turkey's strategy. Recently, for example, US military units reached the port of Alexandroupoli and were scheduled to fly from there to training areas in Romania.<sup>12</sup> In the end of February, Turkish journalist Nur Ozkan Erbay argued that it was 'difficult to predict that the US increasing its military presence [in Greece] is partly a move against Turkey, in addition to Russia and China' and saw, for her part, Greece's actions as 'provocations.'<sup>13</sup> Turkey will arguably change course but certainly monitors the evolution of Greek-American relations.

During the years of Donald Trump, the then US President and his Turkish counterpart Tayyip Erdogan were enjoying a good personal chemistry and were frequent interlocutors. This will hardly be the case in the next four years as Joe Biden remains wary of Turkish general motivations. However, it is not clear whether Anthony Blinken will follow the line of his predecessor who had shown a preference for Greece over Turkey. In September 2020, for example, Mike Pompeo visited the Republic of Cyprus but only met President Nikos Anastasiades, whereas he made no stop in the northern part of the island to meet the then leader of the Turkish-Cypriot community Mustafa Akinci. Two months later he travelled to Turkey but only met the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul. On the contrary, Blinken is expected to look for midway solutions in order to preserve the engagement of Turkey with the

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<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Greece website, 'Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias' Interview in the Athens Daily *Hi Kathimerini*', available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/minister-of-foreign-affairs-nikos-dendias-interview-in-the-athens-daily-kathimerini-with-journalist-vasilis-nedos-10-january-2021.html>, 10 January 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Vassilis Nedos, 'Defense Deal Puts Greek-US Relations on a New Basis', available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1156052/defense-deal-puts-greek-us-relations-on-a-new-basis/>, 1 March 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Valerie Insinna and David B. Larter, 'US Pitches Greece on a Frigate Co-production Deal', available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/ausa/2020/10/19/us-pitches-greece-on-a-frigate-co-production-deal/>, 19 October 2020.

<sup>12</sup> *Kathimerini* English edition website, 'US Army Units Deployed via Alexandroupoli', available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/multimedia/images/1155929/us-army-units-deployed-via-alexandroupoli/>, 26 February 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Nur Ozkan Erbay, 'What's Behind the Greek Provocations?', available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/news-analysis/whats-behind-the-greek-provocations>, 25 February 2021.

Western community – in spite of existing problems such as its acquisition of Russia-made S400 missiles.

The resumption of exploratory talks between Greece and Turkey in January 2021 has not led to a de-escalation of tensions. While the NATO de-confliction mechanism has prevented a military incident, the situation is far from calm. Against this backdrop, Greece has two options. The first is to collaborate with the US in the shaping of a more inclusive environment in the Eastern Mediterranean where dialogue with Turkey on maritime zones will perhaps yield some results. And the second option is to opt for a policy of no-solution on maritime zones via dialogue in the hope that the strengthening of Greek-American relations will reach a level, which will render it hard for Turkey to continue with provocations. In making calculations Greece needs, at first, to understand American priorities which are linked to the policies of China and Russia. It can be anticipated for the US to work for the empowerment of NATO in order to achieve the maximum in its relations with Turkey. Greek-Turkish problems are of minor significance for Washington, while it will be debatable if Greece has to gain by endorsing Cold War dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean.

### **Conclusion**

Lessons from history suggest that Turkey does not refrain from using military force. In parallel with bolstering its armed forces, Greece needs to adopt a smart strategy vis-à-vis the US that will have a double goal. On the one hand, the country has to practically show its determination to proceed to the delimitation of maritime zones with Turkey. And on the other hand, it should expose Turkish tactics that combines dialogue to claims about the sovereignty of some Aegean islets and the militarization status of some Aegean islands. Turkish-American differences – including on sanctions – will allegedly lead the US to support Greece in the management of its own differences with Turkey. The US will likely act, in the next years, to prevent an outcome where Turkey will further step away from the West. Greece will benefit by preserving a proactive stance instead of waiting for such an outcome.