



Weekly Briefing

Greece external relations briefing:

A review of 2023

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Summary

The briefing presents the most prominent developments of Greece's external relations throughout 2023. It analyses the bilateral relations of Greece with the countries of the region, as well as its foreign policy as a member state of both the European Union and NATO. In addition, the briefing presents the relations of Greece with the main international actors, such as the US and China. During 2023, Greece sought to upgrade its position as a key player of peace and stability in the region, improved its bilateral relations with Türkiye and further strengthened its ties with the US and China.

Introduction

Greece's foreign policy in 2023 was mainly characterised by strengthening its role as key player in the Eastern Mediterranean region and beyond. Greece has entered the road to economic recovery and stability. Along to the country's economic stability, Greece is progressively becoming a strong and trusty partner for its EU and NATO allies. Hence, Greece's role as a factor of peace and stability in the NATO's Eastern Flank has been further strengthened during 2023. Greece continued to support the accession of the Western Balkans in the European Union, especially under the new geopolitical balances emerged following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, the year marked a new era in the Greek-Turkish relations. The tensions between the two countries have been de-escalated. The Greek PM and the Turkish President have expressed their strong will to cooperate, despite the existing issues, for the benefit of the generations to come. It is also important to mention that Greece sought to mediate in the Gaza conflict in order to support the establishment of peace in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Finally, Greece positively engaged with international players. It's strategic partnership with the US has been further strengthened in 2023, as well as its good relations with China, under the framework of mutual trust and understanding.

The Western Balkans

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has sifted the geopolitical balances, affecting largely the Western Balkan countries, namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia. In parallel, the integration of the Western Balkans in the EU, initiated by the 2003 EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Thessaloniki, is not yet materialize. The more than 20 years long -and still counting- journey of accession to the EU has generated a strong feeling of fatigue to the concerned countries, which slowly but steadily giving up on reforms. Hence, the so-called EU enlargement fatigue along with socioeconomic issues has pushed the Western Balkan countries further to democratic backsliding.

In December 2023, the European Commission decided to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and granted Georgia the status of a candidate country – in response to Russia’s war of aggression (1). Hence, the Ukrainian crisis has generated a new momentum for Western Balkans enlargement process as well. During the Berlin Process Summit held in Tirana on the 16th of October 2023, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, stated “We (the EU) need to prepare to welcome new members. I believe we must be ready – on both sides – by 2030 to enlarge”. This statement gives a promise to the Western Balkan countries that the long road to accession has an end and the EU membership status date is close enough to feel achievable. Most importantly this statement aims to reenergize the process of enlargement and its tools to harmonize political and economic conditions of the concerned countries in order to achieve the ultimate goal, that is the EU membership. In addition, the 2030 deadline given by the President of the European Council signals to the EU member states the need to also prepare for a big EU enlargement wave.

However, despite the will to boost the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkan countries, the progress of reforms of the candidate countries is still poor. The stagnation or even backsliding in several cases of significant reforms in the Western Balkans countries such as democracy, rule of law, media freedom, fighting corruption and building a functioning market economy raise serious concerns among the EU member states, of whether the concerned countries are ready indeed to acquire the EU membership. The recent case of Fredi Beleri is an example of this concern. Specifically, Fredi Beleri, is a member of the Greek minority living in Albania, who was standing for election as a mayor of the Himare city. Just two days before the elections, on the 12th of May 2023, the Albanian authorities arrested him on the basis of electoral fraud. Beleri argues that there was no evidence and only allegations. This incident put on ice the good relations between Greece and Albania. The Greek side demanded that he will be immediately released and called Albania to respect and guarantee the rule of law and safeguard

the rights of the ethnic Greek minority living in Albania. Despite the fact that Greece is historically a big supporter of the Western Balkans accession to the EU, the Beleri case, has raised concerns in Greece. In particular, Greece in mid-November refused to sign a joint letter of the EU member states concerning the opening of the first five chapters of negotiations for the accession of the Albania to the EU (2). This hard stance of Athens signals to Tirana that Greece is determined to hinder the accession processes of Albania to the EU if the later does not meet the Copenhagen criteria, set by the Treaty on European Union.

Türkiye

The year 2023 marked a new chapter in the Greek-Turkish relations. Historically the relations between the two countries can be characterized as reserved and cautious. Despite being neighbours and NATO members, disputes between Greece and Türkiye, negatively affect their relationship. In 2022 the Greek-Turkish relations reached a new low, when channels of communication between Athens and Ankara were practically deactivated. Specifically, the Turkish President accused the Greek PM of trying to block the F-16 fighter jets sale to Türkiye, during his visit in the US. However, following the February 2023 catastrophic earthquakes in Türkiye and northern Syria, Greece immediately sent aid to the affected areas. This friendly gesture activated the so called “earthquake diplomacy”. Since then, and throughout 2023 channels of communication have been reactivated and a positive climate prevails in the relations of the two countries.

Specifically, in July 2023 the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis had the opportunity to meet during the NATO Summit which took place in Vilnius, Lithuania. The two leaders agreed to open a new chapter in the Greek-Turkish relations, starting with small but meaningful steps, despite that main issues remaining. Mitsotakis and Erdogan agreed to restart the High-Level Cooperation Council - which was frozen since 2016- and the Confidence Building Measures, as well as the Positive Agenda and the political dialogue (3). Another important meeting that needs to be mentioned, is the one held on the 5th of September between the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs George Gerapetritis and his Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan. The two Ministers mission was to discuss the major issues in the Greek-Turkish relations, in order to reduce the tensions; to guide and monitor the discussion at all levels, such as the political dialogue, the Positive Agenda and the Confidence Building Measures in order to deliver beneficial results; and to prepare the meetings between the two leaders (4).

Moreover, on the 20th of September Mitsotakis and Erdogan met in New York in the margins of the United Nations General Assembly and confirmed the timeline of contacts between Greece and Türkiye. Most important, both leaders agreed that the High Level Cooperation Council will be held on the 7th of December. In addition, Mitsotakis and Erdogan discussed a number of several issues of common interest, such as consequences of climate crisis in the Mediterranean region and illegal migration. They agreed to further strengthen the cooperation in order to address these common challenges (5).

As was already planned on the 7th of December Mitsotakis and Erdogan met in Athens in the framework of the High Level Cooperation Council. This was the third meeting between the Greek PM and the Turkish President in the last six months. During the meeting the two leaders stressed the need to strengthen the cooperation between the two countries and pointed out that lately the relations between Greece and Türkiye are calmer, despite the existing issues. The Greek PM stated “Greece and Türkiye ought to live in peace, ought to express their differences, which are well known, they must discuss them honestly and must continue to seek solutions. And if those differences cannot be bridged, they should not automatically produce tensions and crises”. Mitsotakis pointed out the sectors for further cooperation such as trade, electricity, business, sports, technology, tourism, economy, as well as migration and climate change. It should also be mentioned that the Greek PM reaffirmed Greece’s support for Türkiye’s EU accession process and the facilitation of the granting of visas. Concerning visas Mitsotakis mentioned that Greece has requested and secured the approval of the European Commission to activate the possibility for Turkish citizens to visit ten Greek islands for seven days per year, using such visas. This is an initiative that will further strengthen the mutual understanding and respect between the two countries. Mitsotakis also mentioned the thorny issues between Greece and Türkiye, such as the Cyprus issue and stressed the need to open the dialogue in order to make substantial progress on the issues. The Greek PM conclude his speech by stating that despite circumstances have brought the two nations against each other, it is his duty to seize the opportunity to bring the two states closer. He characteristically stated “So far we have managed to bring our relations back to calm waters. Today, in the name of the next generations, we both have to build a tomorrow in which a favourable wind will blow in these calm waters. A tomorrow of peace, progress and cooperation. With responsibility and realism, I want to look to the future today” (6).

The Turkish President on his part stated “we are two countries that share the same sea, it is natural that there are problems between the two countries. The issue is that there is the will to solve these problems”. Erdogan further stated “We want to turn the Aegean into a sea of

peace and cooperation. We aspire to set an example to the world with the joint steps we will take as Türkiye and Greece” and reaffirmed the aspirations of the Greek PM for establishing good neighboring relations between the two countries for the benefit of the generations to come. Erdogan also announced that during the meeting both leaders agreed to strength bilateral trade volume to 10 bil dollars from 5 bil dollars. He further added that both leaders wish to develop the relations in the sectors of tourism and culture. Concerning the fight against terrorism, Erdogan welcomed the closure of the Lavrion Camp near Athens, were according to the Turkish side members of the PKK terrorist organization operated (7).

The Eastern Mediterranean region

On the 7th of October Hamas unleashed a terrorist attack against Israel. More than 1200 Israelis lost their lives and over 200 people were kidnapped. Following this event, all EU member states, including Greece, expressed their solidarity with Israel and supported its right to defence. On the 23rd of October the Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis met with his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem. Mitsotakis expresses his grief and condemned the terrorist attack. He further underscored the right of Israel to self-defence, in accordance with the international law. On his behalf Netanyahu conveyed his appreciation for solidarity (8). Following the military response of Israel in Gaza, on the 27th of October, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a calling for “an immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce” between Israeli forces and Hamas militants in Gaza. Greece abstained as 14 other EU member states, including Germany, Italy, Cyprus. Only four EU countries voted against the resolution (9). This decision of Greece to abstain triggered a domestic political dialogue with the main opposition party calling Greece’s UN voting a “day of shame” for the Greek diplomacy (10).

However, following the military response of Israel in Gaza, Greece started to place more emphasis on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza (11). On the 9th of November the Greek PM in an interview with Politico Magazine stated that Israel’s right to self-defense is unquestionable, “how it does so actually matter, and it matters considerably”. Moreover, on the 9th of November, shortly before participating in the Paris International humanitarian conference for Gaza’s civilian population, Mitsotakis met with his Palestinian counterpart and expresses Greece’s determination to support the creation of humanitarian corridor, as well as underlined the country’s longstanding position for a two-state solution (12). Moreover, on the 16th of November the Greek MFA George Gerapetritis visited the West Bank and met with the

Palestinian Authority Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki and the Prime Minister Mohammad Staiyeh. During this meeting Gerapetritis stressed the urgent need for humanitarian pause in Gaza to allow sustainable humanitarian corridors to be established (13).

The Greek MFA also met with his Israeli counterpart Eli Cohen at the Foreign Ministry in Israel. Gerapetritis conveyed the Palestinian side's concerns about the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza (14). Following the two meetings Gerapetritis stated in an interview with Reuters that Greece is an honest mediator in the Middle East. Specifically, he stated "I am in constant communication with both sides, and I am relatively optimistic that we could have some positive results soon" emphasizing once again the important role of Greece as a key player of stability in the region. Hence, evidently Greece wants to play a more active role in the establishment of peace and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Besides, it is for the benefit of Greece to exist in a peaceful neighborhood.

International players

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Greece has gained an increased geopolitical importance, as a factor of peace and stability in NATO's Eastern Flank. Undoubtedly Türkiye is an important NATO ally in the region. However, the ambiguous approach of Türkiye to the Ukrainian crisis, raised concerns to its Western allies. Türkiye on the one hand condemned the Russian invasion but, on the other, did not align with the sanctions against Russia taken by the West. On the contrary Greece, despite the historically good Greek-Russian relations, openly supported Ukraine and imposed sanctions against Russia. Consequently, Greece's role as an important and reliable partner of NATO and the United States was strengthened. Hence, in 2022 the bilateral relations between Greece and the US reached a peak.

In 2023 Greek-US ties continued to be strong. On the 21st of February Anthony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, after his trip to Türkiye, visited Athens. The agendas of these meetings were first to propose the two countries to provide weapons to Ukraine to assist Kiev fight against Moscow and second to observe the state of Greek-Turkish relations. It is worth noting that this meeting followed the de-escalation of the tensions between Greece and Türkiye, and as such it was an opportunity for Greece to promote its role as a factor of stability and security in the wider region (15). It is worth noting that the US have agreed to sale F35 fighter jets to Greece, approving Greece's official request submitted in June 2022. The US have also agreed on the request of Türkiye to purchase F16 fighter jets. Thus, evidently the US wants to keep a balanced strategy towards Greece and Türkiye and keep both allies satisfied. It seems

that the US is arguably interested in giving Greece a qualitative military edge, although it is premature to draw safe conclusions. The potential sale of F35 to Türkiye is not excluded and will depend on the future course of negotiations between Washington and Ankara (16).

Despite the new challenges of the emerging bipolar world, the Greek Chinese relations remain close and strong. This was demonstrated by the recent visit of the Greek PM in Beijing on the 2nd and 3rd of November. During his visit the Greek PM met with the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping. During the meeting both leaders had the opportunity to discuss issues of bilateral relations, as well as the international developments (17). Mitsotakis and Xi Jinping agreed on deepening economic cooperation and further strengthen the relations in the tourist sector. The Greek PM reiterated Greece's long-standing position on the necessity for open channels of communication between EU and China and pointed out Greece's potential role as a "bridge" to this relationship. Furthermore, the two leaders re-affirmed the strong ties between the two nations and expressed the will to further deepen the cooperation. The win-win cooperation of the two countries signs as a paradigm of the mutual respect and understanding between Greece and China. The strong presence of the Greek enterprises in the 6th China International Expo (CIEE), held on the 5th until 10th of November, for one more year demonstrated the fruitful economic cooperation between Greece and China.

Conclusion

The year 2023 found Greece in a middle of two great conflicts. On the Northeast the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and on the Southeast the conflict in Gaza. Greece as a member state of the EU and NATO is a key factor of peace and stability in the region. Its external policy throughout 2023 focused exactly on this end. Besides, it is for the country's best interest to establish peace in the turbulent region of East Mediterranean. During 2023 Greece and Türkiye improved its bilateral relations, despite the existing issues. Moreover, the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU was also high in the agenda of the Greek foreign policy. However, the frozen ties between Greece and Albania mainly due to the Beleri case, shows that Athens will keep a hard stance in order to safeguard its interests. Concerning the Gaza conflict, Greece aimed to play a more active role for establishing peace in the region. Moreover, during 2023 Greece further strengthened its ties with the US. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties raised by the increasing Sino-American antagonism, Greece reaffirmed its good relations with China and expressed the will to further deepen Greek-Chinese economic cooperation in the future.

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