

Greece as a Failed State and Regional Security: Why the US should be looking closer.

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Abstract

In terms of U.S. foreign policy Greece, has remained under the radar screen since its entrance in to the European Union in 1981. Current events in Europe concerning the membership of Greece in the Eurozone call for a closer attention of the U.S. towards the Hellenic Republic as it undergoes severe political and intractable economic crises. A factor of little significance for the U.S. in the post-Cold War era Greece, may be gradually drifting into a failed state, an eventuality which may drive into a shift of the existent sphere of influence towards Russia, the establishment of a new theater in the war on terror, and even the ignition of a severe and prolonged regional conflict. At any degree of accuracy all such scenarios may dramatically affect U.S. interests both regionally and globally.

Introduction: Under the U.S. Radar Screen

Since the entrance of Greece in the European Union in 1981 the policy of the US has gradually been transformed into dealing with the country still as part of the NATO alliance yet with much greater discretion, more as part of the EU than of Greece itself. Considering the nebulous past in the US – Greece relations after the end of the Greek civil war, this was a rather welcomed development for both parties. The security and strategic dimension of Greece in the region for the US is that Greece presents a stabilizing factor in the area including the Balkans, and the Libyan Sea south of Crete, the later providing a minor leaping stone for an air-bridge from the Atlantic or Germany to North Africa and the Middle East. As long as the two Aegean adversaries, Greece and Turkey, manage to avoid a full scale engagement against each other security in the region has so far been taken for granted.

Since the 2008 Greece has been drifting towards an economic disaster including a \$445 billion national debt, an increasing probability of default, expulsion from the Eurozone, and severe diplomatic, and economic isolation. The deteriorating economy in Greece of the last decade has set the country on a course of social, economic and potentially military disintegration. Even though the military forces and law enforcement institutions, stressed by an uncontrollable flow of immigration, remains in relatively good shape, ready to assert itself, what will happen if the situation deteriorates further? How would that affect regional security and why should the US be following Greece closer? What actions should it take to avoid the worst case scenario?

This analysis is based on open sources and is intended to provide a brief overview of potential implications of the Greek economic crisis on U.S. interests in the region. It provides a gradual overview from the immediate future - a post Eurozone Greece - to the worst case scenario - Greece as a failed state. Finally it provides a recommendation for a post-Cold War approach towards Greece by the U.S. beyond military contingency plans.

Greece as a failed state: A liability in regional and global security.

Level 1 - Immediate Future: A Shift on the Spheres of Influence.

Traditionally Greece has played a consistent role as a member of the western alliance. Its NATO and the European Union membership are only recent forms of formalization of such tradition. If however Greece becomes isolated by its western strategic allies, and cornered by the worst of a post-euro zone situation, plunged into poverty and starvation, then as discussions already suggest, it will pursue alternative alliances, most likely with Russia, its Eastern Orthodox kin. Such eventuality will allow Russia a step hold in the Aegean Sea, a strategic dream and aspiration of centuries of Russian leaders since the arrival of the Rus' in the outskirts of Byzantine Constantinople, June 18, 860.

Russia's recent \$3.3 billion loan to Cyprus to help rescue the island's economy from defaulting, and a barrage of heavy investment offers to Greece including the purchase of Greek Public Gas Corporation (DEPA), demonstrate a significant and well guided diplomatic foresight in the Eastern Mediterranean. With the prospect of losing its naval bases in Syria due to the ongoing revolution against President Bashar Assad, Russia has already expressed overt interest in stationing ships in Piraeus, Greece's largest port. DEPA is a primary customer of Gazprom, and Greece has signed up for its part to the southern section of South Stream, the gas pipeline connecting the Russian grid from Bregovaya in the Black Sea to Italy via Greece; and Austria via Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary. Yet, so far, Greek governments have discretely avoided any dramatic move towards a bold financial capitulation to Russia. May 2012 elections however, showed a potential opening towards that direction with the conservatives who so far held Russia at a distance, giving way to a number of friendly to Russia parties including the SYRIZA the second largest party in Greece (16.8%), Independent Greeks (11%), and the Communist Party (8.5%).

As discussions over the exit of Greece from the Eurozone intensify with scenarios including extreme inflation and cataclysmic economic changes in an uncertain new Drahma-era for Greece, the Russian partnership might become a favorable choice even to the most pro-Western elements in the country.

With an increasing presence of Russia in Central and Latin America today (return to Cuba and dockings in Venezuela), and a potential opening of the Barents, Kara, Laptev and Eastern Siberia Seas due to climate change, this might be the beginning of a new multi regional role of Russia as an emerging Naval power.

Discussions for alternative to Russia alliances include China which has indicated an interest. Such eventuality will bring China permanently in the Aegean and consequently also in Northern Africa and the Middle East.

Level 2 – Towards a Failed State: A Breeding Ground for International Crime and Terror?

In the case of a failed state, Greece will become the ideal geopolitical bridge between the Middle East, Africa, and Europe for every criminal and terrorist entity possible. As the situation in Libya,

Egypt, and Syria are yet to be determined, there is a remote or even not-so remote possibility of Northern Africa and the Levant falling into the hands of radicals with aspirations towards the North, a scenario which might even encourage further radicals in Greece's neighboring country Turkey which is currently going through major transitions from a purely secular state into a secular state with Islamic undertones, including a constitutional reform. As a failed state, Greece will provide both safe territories for terrorist organizations as well as a vast array of choices of destinations after training and preparing for attacks in Western Europe, the Balkans, Turkey itself, and the Caucasus and Russia. The geographical position of Greece and also its complex heavy island-and-mountains terrain makes it an ideal arrival point from multiple destinations of materials such as rockets and WMD for assembly followed by distribution to the regions mentioned above. With 624 miles mountainous borders and 8498 miles of coastline there is plenty of options for landing to and taking off from Greece even with times of normalcy.

If Yemen represents today, a bridge for Al Qaeda from East Asia and the Arab Peninsula to the African continent, Greece will become their transcontinental bridge for Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. It will become a new theater in the war against terror with the Greeks squeezed in between a life at the edge of legality and a criminal regime Mexico-style using the country for narco-trafficking, human trafficking and illegal weapons trade. Smuggling immigrants and narcotics into the country is a constant challenge for the authorities even during the most prosperous and peaceful times in Greece. As the means for enforcement deteriorate criminal elements will aspire to establish permanent bases in Greece potentially expanding and igniting and re-igniting waves of criminality in the Balkans, the Black Sea and even Italy.

Level 3 – Greece as a Failed State: Blocking the Aegean Corridor, an old American Headache.

On September the 12th 1827 a boy named Giuseppe boarded the Cortese for his first voyage from Nice to the Black Sea. While sailing through the Aegean the ship was attacked and looted by Greek pirates who took everything they could carry with them, including young Giuseppe's shoes. The pirates spared the lives of the crew and passengers and young Giuseppe was left literally naked at the island of Cythera to continue his adventurous life, later to become the legend named Giuseppe Garibaldi.

The times of Garibaldi were troubled times, for Greece was just rising out of a disintegrating Ottoman Empire and four centuries of servitude. Piracy was common in the Aegean and a single trip from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea was a risky and potentially perilous affair. Garibaldi was attacked later by pirates of the Aegean up to three times in one single trip, but survived by resisting successfully. Even though his support for the Greek revolution for independence remained unscathed the picture painted by his adventures send us a bleak message about how Greece as a failed state might fare in regards to regional security in our own days. Would that drive the U.S. into new adventures in the Aegean Sea?

One doesn't have to look too far as piracy in the Aegean Sea is already part of the US Naval history. Due to the decline of the Greek Navy, at the time when Garibaldi was captured, in the same waters, by orders of President Monroe, the U.S. Navy was already engaged in a costly antipiracy operation

lasting from 1825 to 1828 trying to restore order committing hundreds of sailors and dozens of ships alone and in coalition with British and French warships.

Why the Aegean Sea matters?

When it comes to how important stability in the Aegean is, technically speaking, not much has changed since the 1800s. Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine still depend heavily on cargo ships crossing the Aegean Sea and then the Bosphorus for commerce and tourism industry. Major port cities along the coast of the Black Sea including Constanta, Giresun, Hopa, Istanbul, Kerch, Mangalia, Novorossiysk, Odessa, Ordu, Poti, Rize, Samsun, Sevastopol, Sochi, Sukhumi, Trabzon, Varna, Yalta and Zonguldak are themselves important commercial and resource providers to many more countries and cities connecting to the peninsula close or far. Any disturbance in the Aegean Sea would mean very serious trouble for far more many people than those in Greece alone. This is a worst case scenario - assuming Greece turning into a European version of Somalia - but it is a scenario tested in the past and in the absence of options, and if Greece fails to return to stability and remains on the course of social and economic disintegration, just as any other legal or illegal alternative, piracy might become again an attractive option.

Piracy in the Aegean?

According to Martin Murphy there are three sufficient and necessary conditions for piracy to occur: Favorable maritime geography; Favorable political climate; Safe havens ashore.

Maritime Geography:

Besides Garibaldi, the list of legendary captives by Aegean pirates includes Diogenes the Cynic around 310 B.C., and no other than Julius Caesar in 75 B.C. In the broader context of history piracy appears to be a cyclical phenomenon in the region. The first obvious reason is that the Aegean Sea is today a corridor, a natural multimillion cargo shipping lane without an alternative course from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Black Sea. It is by far, shorter than the open coast of Somalia but provides a much narrower and more defined shipping route for pirates to locate their prey, stalk, and assault.

Safe havens ashore:

On the other hand the Aegean Sea is broad enough (83,000 sq miles) and peppered with thousands of islands, some of which uninhabited, providing the ideal safe havens for pirates to hide for enough time to strip and abandon a tourist cruise ship or medium size cargo ship before distributing its wealth into smaller boats and disperse further.

Political Climate:

It is almost impossible to imagine contemporary Greek society ever endorsing piracy as a source of income. However in the worst case scenario and as decentralization of the state control of economy will abandon islander and some coastal communities to their fates such scenario may become visible. Furthermore with a crippled Greek military the state will fail to control criminality if Greeks or even non-Greek elements decide to prey on commercial or touristic ships.

An invitation for trouble.

Turkey, which is already engaged in a ghost war with Greece over territorial rights in the Aegean, will pay the price directly, by suffering a potential blockage of the route from the Mediterranean to the Bosphorus. Any such blockage will cause serious damage to its commercial transportation and tourism industry. In the absence of a capable Greek Navy and a potent Hellenic Air Force, Turkey will most likely both assert its territorial claims in the Sea and if necessary pursue a war against pirates far and beyond in order to deprive pirates of safe heavens.

Russia and other countries from the Black Sea may follow suit with piracy creating an explosive situation resembling the complexities of the pre-WWI realities more so than what we might expect in the 21st century.

Inevitably, the U.S. Navy and its allies may find themselves returning to the Aegean for a 200 year old mission of clearing the Aegean of pirates and restoring the commercial and strategic routes for the South Eastern flanks of NATO.

Executive Summary.

The list of possibilities does not end here but this is only a concept analysis, a first glimpse of why the U.S. should be looking towards Greece closer than it has during the last twenty years. It is imperative that security in the Aegean Sea is maintained for if it fails it will become a landslide towards circumstances very hard to reverse. The role of the U.S. can no more remain that of a distant observer neither should it remain idle till military response becomes necessary when the worst scenarios are manifested.

The U.S. has to look closer and reach out for stronger ties with Greece immediately. Having learned from mistakes of the past, the U.S. under the leadership of President Barack Obama and Secretary Hillary Clinton and in consistency to what emerges as a new conciliatory foreign policy can work together with the new emerging Greek political forces – including if not especially so with the Left - in guaranteeing a long lasting security in the Aegean Sea and the broader region.

The newly elected parties of the left are at this point considering all options and it will be a tactical error if the U.S. chooses to ignore them or put pressure on them instead of exploring common ground in preserving peace and stability in the region. To them currently the challenge is not the U.S. but a difficulty in restoring the Greek economy and moving back towards economic growth. Even if these particular parties fail to get the message, kind gestures in this corner of the earth may take the U.S. a long way in preserving its interests without engaging militarily.

A cautious handling of the situation in Greece today may make the difference between having a new Cuba and an even stronger NATO ally, either at the meeting point between Northern Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans and Europe, and the Black Sea - all of which remain uncertain. Russia and even China are already taking bold steps towards that direction. The U.S. may begin late but will do so with the advantage of an old traditional friendship.

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