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## Greece, Turkey, and NATO

David Binder

Among the odd pairings in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, along with France-Germany, Romania-Hungary, and other ancient enemies—historically speaking—is the combination of the two Aegean neighbors, Turkey and Greece. In alliance terms they are practically twins, having both entered in 1952.

In a mere quarter century they had fought four major wars: in 1897 the Greek-Turkish war, in 1912–13 the Balkan wars, in 1914–18 World War I, and in 1919–22 another Greek-Turkish war. In addition, there was the destruction of several thousand Greek churches by Turkish nationalists in 1915 and the expulsion of more than a million Anatolian Greeks following the 1922 war. On the other hand, about half a million Turkish Muslims were expelled from Greece in the wake of that conflict. And who could forget that the two peoples were at odds during the Ottoman Empire, which subjugated all Greeks (among others) for four hundred years. And what Turk could forget the Greece of the *Megali Idea* (the Big Idea, born in 1844), which would have re-created a Greek-dominated Aegean and a restored Greek Constantinople in place of Turkish Istanbul? Relations between the two today, while correct and in some areas cooperative, are still filled with suspicion and very bad memories.

As an alliance originally devoted solely to mutual defense of its members in 1949, NATO has since the end of the Cold War transformed itself into a group engaged almost entirely in attack mode:

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1. bombing Serbian forces in Bosnia in 1993,
2. bombing Serbia over Kosovo in 1999,
3. invading Afghanistan in 2001,
4. (several alliance members) conquering Iraq in 2003, and
5. bombing Libya starting in March 2011.

For their part, despite deep and abiding differences, Turkey and Greece have followed remarkably parallel policies on recent and current issues involving NATO. Both avoided engagement in the alliance's bombing attacks against Serbian forces in Bosnia in 1995 (although a few Turkish warplanes did join NATO forces attacking Serbia in 1999). Both kept a distance from military engagement by alliance members in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and most recently in Libya.

To be sure, both Ankara and Athens authorized the dispatch of troops under the umbrella of NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, established in 2003 to fight the Taliban. Greece has 158 troops stationed at Kabul's airport compound; Turkey has 1,840 in Wardak Province, in the vicinity of Kabul. However, although neither unit has ever engaged in combat with the Taliban, their differences over relations with the European Union did cause some problems. In 2009, NATO's secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen said tensions between the two hampered operations in Afghanistan and Somalia.<sup>1</sup>

In September 2011, Panagiotis Beglitis, the Greek defense minister, said Athens would soon cut its troop commitments. At an informal meeting of EU defense ministers he said, "Greece will significantly reduce its participation in NATO and EU military missions due to the economic crisis in the country."<sup>2</sup> For its part, Turkey has warned that NATO was relying too much on "force" in Afghanistan. It proposed, in its capacity as a Muslim country, to open a diplomatic mission to the Taliban.<sup>3</sup>

Greece and Turkey took almost identical stances toward NATO's engage-

1. "Rasmussen Tells Turkey, Greece to Resolve Differences," NATOSource, 28 August 2009, [www.natosource.com/2009/08/rasmussen-tells-turkey-greece-to.html](http://www.natosource.com/2009/08/rasmussen-tells-turkey-greece-to.html).  
 2. "Greece to Cut Participation in NATO, EU Military Missions," *Athens News* (Wroclaw), 23 September 2011.  
 3. "NATO Making Mistake in Afghanistan: Turkish Minister," *Telegraph* (Kolkata, India), 16 April 2008.

ment in Libya (both countries previously enjoyed lucrative trade with the Muammar Qaddafi government). In March 2011, following the United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing establishment of a no-fly zone over the North African country, each made a minimal military commitment: Athens opened its air space to NATO planes and permitted the US Navy to deploy ships from its Souda Bay base on Crête. Turkey dispatched four frigates and a submarine to join alliance patrols off the Libyan coast, but vowed it would “never point a gun at the Libyan people.”<sup>4</sup> (Apropos Libya, it is noteworthy that after seven months of bombing Qaddafi forces — with more than ninety-three hundred airstrikes — NATO announced in Brussels that although it did not know where to attack, it was going to continue bombing anyway, stopping in late October.<sup>5</sup> France’s defense minister Gerard Longuet had said the alliance would cease only when the new Libyan government requested it to stop.<sup>6</sup>)

Here it is worth recalling the beginnings — how NATO got started early in the Cold War and the historical roles played by Greece and Turkey in their relationships to the United States. Americans became involved in Greece and Turkey more by accident than design in 1947. As the late Cyrus L. Sulzberger of the *New York Times* recorded in his memoir, *A Long Row of Candles*:

Britain’s traditional policy was to prevent any European power from bursting through to the Eastern Mediterranean via Greece or Turkey. This policy was reasserted by Churchill in the wartime bargain with Stalin that insured British dominance in Greece. However, by 1947 London discovered itself so impoverished that it could no longer afford the burden.<sup>7</sup>

“Washington assumed it openly in the Truman Doctrine,” Sulzberger added. “That was how the United States first inherited a precise overseas territorial commitment outside our hemisphere, a habit that was to grow rapidly.”

As Sulzberger observed, Americans intervened in Greece to fight — and defeat — what was an entirely homegrown communist movement and have

4. “Turkey to Send Frigates, Submarine to Help NATO Enforce Libya Arms Embargo,” *Zaman* (Istanbul), 24 March 2011.

5. “NATO Bombs Hit Hospital in Libyan City of Sirte,” Pan African NewsWire, 8 October 2011.

6. “NATO Says Air Strikes Will Continue in Libya,” Associated Press, 6 October 2011.

7. C. L. Sulzberger, *A Long Row of Candles* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 243.

been there ever since. In Turkey the United States began stationing intercontinental ballistic missiles aimed at Soviet targets in 1959—also under NATO’s political umbrella. (They were removed in 1963.) Many people of my generation believe that the Cold War officially began in March 1946, when Winston Churchill declared in Fulton, Missouri:

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an *iron curtain* has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere.<sup>8</sup>

In Fulton, Churchill also mentioned that there was a Soviet threat to Turkey. Yet many historians now date the beginning of the Cold War one year later, when President Harry S. Truman declared that the United States would support Greece and Turkey with military and economic assistance where there were “free people who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures.”<sup>9</sup>

Truman was plainly alluding to the Soviet Union and suggesting it was backing the Greek communist forces in their struggle to gain power (although there is *no* evidence Stalin was doing that). President Truman’s new policy was based on the famous telegram of George F. Kennan in which the young diplomat proposed—in February 1946—that the United States pursue a policy of “containment” toward the rampant and threatening power of the Soviet Union. In retrospect, and without any sympathy for Stalin or his policies, there was in 1946 no imminent Soviet military or even ideological threat to either Greece or Turkey. But the United States declared there was a threat, and that sufficed to justify not only the Truman Doctrine but also the Marshall Plan, enacted in Congress in 1948, and the creation of the North Atlantic alliance in 1949. Thus in those far off days a lot of healthy eggs were hatched by scrawny Greece and scrawny Turkey—which lay about as far away from the North Atlantic as one could get and still belong to NATO.

8. Winston S. Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace,” speech delivered at Westminster College, Fulton, MO, 5 March 1946, [www.hpol.org/churchill/](http://www.hpol.org/churchill/).

9. President Harry S. Truman, “Address to Joint Session of Congress,” 12 March 1947, Truman Library, Independence, MO, [avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp).

But how did NATO switch, quietly—almost stealthily—from a purely defensive alliance into an aggressive formation? The defensive stance had been based on its charter’s article 5, which stated that its members “agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.” In fact article 5 was invoked only once by the United States—one day after 11 September 2001.

The NATO trail from defense to offense is murky. However, it appears to have begun in December 1989, less than a month following the opening of the Berlin Wall. Then the United States went to war in Panama, not in Europe or Asia. President George H. W. Bush launched Operation Just Cause against the government of Manuel Noriega. The rationale for the US invasion and occupation of tiny Panama was to “defend democracy,” Bush said.<sup>10</sup>

The next marker on the road to NATO’s strategic switch came in late 1992. It was again set in the US capital, the alliance’s birthplace. (Its charter, originally called the Washington Treaty, was signed there 4 April 1949.) This time the enemy was in Somalia, where a civil war was blocking humanitarian aid efforts. When asked the rationale, the White House responded that it had “a clear vision of humanitarian relief and nation-building.”<sup>11</sup> That rationale was also provided by newly installed Bill Clinton and his aides with an ever more insistent drumbeat for military intervention on the side of the Muslim forces in the civil war in Bosnia.

There, said Secretary of State Warren Christopher in February 1993, the situation “tests our ability to adopt new approaches to our foreign policy in a world that has fundamentally changed. It tests our commitment to nurturing democracy . . . it tests our willingness to help our institutions of collective security, such as NATO evolve in a new way that can meet the demands of the new age.”<sup>12</sup>

The next step was a naval blockade bottling up Serbian-Montenegrin shipping. Operation Sharp Guard began in June 1993 after approval by NATO.

10. Quoted in Joseph Smith, *The United States and Latin America: A History of American Diplomacy, 1776–2000* (London: Psychology, 2000), 167.

11. Walter Clarke and Jeffrey Herbst, “Somalia and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention,” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 2 (1996).

12. Warren Christopher, *In the Stream of History: Shaping Foreign Policy for a New Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 344.

This was followed in 1994 by a United Nations Protection Force request for NATO air support, which resulted in a raid by two US F-16s on a Serbian command post in the Gorazde area south of Sarajevo. As later described in a Bosnian chronicle, it was “the first NATO ground assault in the forty-seven-year history of the alliance.”<sup>13</sup> US-led air attacks on Serbs escalated through the spring and summer of 1995 in what NATO called Operation Deliberate Force.

On 27 November 1995, President Clinton said regarding the rationale for armed intervention, “Securing peace in Bosnia will also help to build a free and stable Europe.” He added, “The only force capable of getting this job done is NATO.” He emphasized that the United States was “NATO’s leader.”<sup>14</sup>

Clinton took the same line on 24 March 1999 in announcing his decision, in the sharpening conflict in Kosovo, to commence bombing Serbia proper, saying, “We act to stand united with our allies to defend peace—to save innocent lives and preserve peace, freedom and stability in Europe.” Then, invoking the Atlantic Alliance, he preached, “Imagine what would happen if we and our allies instead decided just to look the other way as these people were massacred on NATO’s doorstep.”<sup>15</sup>

Toward the conclusion of this emotional declaration, Clinton curiously added a laundry list of other pressing problems, saying that the United States was also determined to deal with “the challenge of resolving the tension between Greece and Turkey and building bridges to the Islamic world.” As “NATO’s leader,” Clinton was also instrumental in the first post–Cold War expansion of the alliance, in 1999.

In late November of that year Clinton visited both Athens and Ankara. An eyewitness in the Greek capital wrote, “Bill Clinton arrived in Greece like a thief in the night.”<sup>16</sup> His motorcade moved down darkened boulevards carefully cleared of people. Three weeks earlier ten thousand Greeks stood

13. Sonia Lucarrelli, *Europe and the Breakup of Yugoslavia* (Boston/Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2000), 16.

14. “President Clinton’s Speech on Bosnia,” CNN transcript, 27 November 1995, [www.cnn.com/US/9511/bosnia\\_speech/speech.html](http://www.cnn.com/US/9511/bosnia_speech/speech.html).

15. “Clinton’s Statement: Stabilising Europe,” BBC transcript, 25 March 1999, [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/303693.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/303693.stm).

16. Bill Wayland, “Greeks Reject NATO,” *Workers World* (Athens), 2 December 1999.

in Constitution Square to attend a mock trial of the US president—in pouring rain. In Ankara, Turkish police had beaten and arrested anti-Clinton protestors.

The next round of NATO expansion came under George W. Bush. In April 2007, he signed the Orwellian-sounding NATO Freedom Consolidation Act, which extended US military assistance to aspiring NATO members, specifically Georgia and Ukraine. Further expansion, according to the former national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, was “historically mandatory, geopolitically desirable.”<sup>17</sup>

A decade earlier, Brzezinski readily admitted NATO’s enlargement was not about US security in any conventional sense, but “about America’s role in Europe—whether America will remain a European power and whether a larger democratic Europe will remain organically linked to America.”

The alliance has more than tripled its size since its inception, with six growth spurts from the original eight to twenty-eight and with still more candidates waiting to be admitted, including the unfortunately named “Macedonia.” The current NATO secretary-general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen of Denmark, spoke in February 2010 of “new global threats” requiring NATO responses. His list included everything from energy supply disruptions to maritime piracy.<sup>18</sup> The idea of an earth-circling NATO was launched in April 2006 by NATO secretary-general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer when he suggested that it become “an alliance with global partners.”<sup>19</sup> Ivo Daalder, the Dutch-born US ambassador to NATO (who worked in the Clinton White House), picked up on the Hoop Scheffer suggestion in an article in *Foreign Affairs*. Daalder wrote:

NATO’s next move must be to open its membership to any democratic state in the world that is willing and able to contribute to the fulfillment of NATO’s new responsibilities. Only a truly global alliance can address the global challenges of the day.<sup>20</sup>

17. Quoted in Srdja Trifkovic, “NATO after Libya,” *Veracity Voice*, 31 August 2011. Brzezinski wrote this in 2007.

18. Quoted in Richard Weitz, “To Deal with New Challenges, Should NATO Go Global?” Yale Global, New Haven, CT, 26 February 2010, [yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/should-nato-go-global](http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/should-nato-go-global).

19. “NATO Looks at Global Partnerships,” [www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-86369858-145DCEAE/nato\\_live/news\\_22328.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-86369858-145DCEAE/nato_live/news_22328.htm?selectedLocale=en).

20. Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier, “Global NATO,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 5 (2006).



There are two big obstacles to such a wide reach by NATO, which the globalists dismiss as bothersome birth defects:

1. Article 10 of the NATO charter restricts new membership to European countries.
2. Article 6 limits responses to attacks on forces and territories of any of the parties in Europe or North America.

Daalder appears to brush aside the difficulty in amending these clauses. He also anticipated opposition, including the possible suspicion that he was suggesting NATO simply supplant the 193-member United Nations. He writes:

Unlikely as this might sound, the proposal would point to supplanting the United Nations with NATO. An enlarged NATO would not undermine the United Nations or the European Union, neither of which has the military capacity that NATO possesses.

Because NATO essentially is a military alliance—albeit one with a democratic political foundation—even an enlarged alliance would not become another UN. Rather, NATO would become a more capable and legitimate adjunct to the UN by helping to implement and enforce its decisions. If, as in the case of Kosovo in 1999, the UN is unwilling to authorize action against a threat to international peace and security, NATO might have to act anyway.<sup>21</sup>

For the record, the Hoop Scheffer–Daalder global NATO was swiftly shot down by France’s foreign minister Michele Alliot-Marie, who wrote in October 2006 that the organization should remain a “European-American military alliance.” To do otherwise would dilute its “natural solidarity,” she contended.<sup>22</sup> However, on the global scale it is also noteworthy that in a time of great economic stress and looming budget cuts, the US military establishment continues to grow. In January 2011, according to the Pentagon, the American flag flew over 750 US military sites in 120 foreign countries and US territories abroad. (Two new radar stations are being added in Turkey and Romania.)

21. Ibid.

22. Michele Alliot-Marie, “Don’t Diminish NATO’s Effectiveness,” *Washington Times*, 20 October 2006.

Meanwhile the US foreign policy establishment—regardless whether Republican or Democrat in persuasion—continues to back NATO virtually without reservation. The picture in various European capitals, including Athens and Ankara, is different. A US embassy cable from Greece in 2005, intercepted by Wikileaks, is an example. The cable, sent by Tom Countryman, the chargé d'affaires, says, “In Greece the twin threats of extremism and violence stem . . . from a decades-old homegrown anti-US, anti-NATO, anti-globalism sentiment that is deeply ingrained in Greek society.”<sup>23</sup>

Another Athens embassy cable dated 16 May 2008 says, “The Greek public is instinctively suspicious of NATO and equates NATO with the US.” The embassy added that it expected “an increase in the number of Greek policy elites who share the popular perception that NATO is anti-Greek.”<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps it is possible to gauge Greek popular sentiments about NATO in some of the following comments posted on 23 September 2011 at the blog Free Republic.

1. “NATO’s mission was over 20 years ago, and like many bureaucracies, it will never put itself out of business. So instead it decided to expand. If NATO didn’t exist today, no one would think to invent it” (signed PGR88).
2. “I hope all the NATO members leave that useless and obsolete alliance. The only combat operations it has ever carried out were/are on behalf of Muslims” (signed Spirochete).
3. “Greece has had a very large military in proportion to their economy and population due to their long-running cold war with Turkey. The thing is, they couldn’t afford it—this military force was subsidized by the US and NATO, and as soon as the Cold War ended, Greece was no longer of strategic importance, and the well went dry” (signed Jerseyan Exile).
4. “Yes, this is NATO headquarters. We’re getting ready to send out another peacekeeping mission and we were wondering if we could count

23. Combating Extremism in Greece, cable 05ATHENS2529, 27 September 2005, [wikileaks.org/cable/2005/05ATHENS2529.html](http://wikileaks.org/cable/2005/05ATHENS2529.html).

24. US Embassy Athens, Reference 08ATHENS678, confidential, 16 May 2008, [leaks.hohesc.us/?view=08ATHENS678](http://leaks.hohesc.us/?view=08ATHENS678).

on Greece's support? . . . I'm sorry, did you say you'll donate three sheep and a can of olives? . . . Oh, good, I thought I didn't hear that right . . . you'll sell us three sheep and a can of olives . . . how much? . . . that much! . . . how much for just the sheep?" (signed blueunicorn).<sup>25</sup>

Turkey, after a lengthy period of refusal, announced on 14 September 2011 that it would allow the United States to station an early warning radar in Kurecik, some 435 miles west of the Iranian frontier, as part of NATO's new antimissile shield. This prompted anti-NATO demonstrations by hundreds of protestors in Istanbul a week later.

So how have things been going between Athens and Ankara? In general Greek-Turkish relations were put on a better footing by the retirement and death in 1996 of Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu, a fierce enemy of Turks. His son, George Papandreu, first as foreign minister and later as prime minister, displayed a more positive and rational attitude toward Turkey. In 2009 a BBC analysis found that official relations between Greece and Turkey had improved, mainly due to Greece's supportive attitude (at that time) toward Turkey's efforts to join the European Union in 2005.<sup>26</sup> (This chimera evaporated, and Turkey's European ambitions have since been in the deep freeze.)

George Papandreu succeeded in establishing a good relationship with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who visited Greece in 2010, the first visit by a Turkish leader in six years. Relations improved a little, especially with regard to cutting defense spending. The two also signed more than twenty bilateral agreements.

This is not the occasion to delve into the current economic miseries of Greece or the current economic happy days of Turkey. Suffice it to say that in 2009 Greece's economy, hollow as it was, grew at more than 4 percent. In 2010 Turkey's economy grew at 9 percent and was expected to reach 7 percent for 2011.

Now it would seem echoes of the Greek *Megali Idea* are clashing with

25. Responses to Tyler Durden, "This Is Not Sparta As Greece Threatens to Partially Withdraw from NATO Citing Poverty," ZeroHedge.com, 23 September 2011, at Free Republic, [www.free-republic.com/focus/f-news/2782834/post](http://www.free-republic.com/focus/f-news/2782834/post).

26. BBC, "Turkey Tries to Revive EU Drive," 19 January 2009, [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7837145.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7837145.stm).

“neo-Ottoman” pretensions of Turks over that classic trouble spot, Cyprus. On 26 September 2011 Turkish naval vessels and planes provided escorts for the research vessel *Koca Piri Reis* as it drilled for oil and gas fifty miles off the island’s shores. Greek-Cypriot oil and gas exploration had begun in the previous week in another area 150 miles from the coast of Cyprus despite Turkish warnings. Prime ministers Erdogan and Papandreou swiftly urged restraint to each other.

There is also a new strain involving what I would call the assertive “neo-Muslim” policy of Erdogan’s Turkey, as demonstrated, for instance, in his government’s recent anti-Israel and pro-Egyptian actions. This has reinforced the opposition of Germany and France toward Turkey’s accession to the European Union. “Regrettably, accession negotiations have not moved forward for more than one year,” said Stefan Fuele, the European commissioner for enlargement and neighborhood on 11 October. Afterward, Prime Minister Erdogan declared Turkey would “freeze” relations with the EU for the six months that Cyprus will assume the presidency in Brussels on 1 July 2012.<sup>27</sup>

Greece and Turkey brushed close to armed hostilities numerous times after joining NATO in 1952—over the Cyprus issue, over air space, and over territorial waters. Their membership in NATO may have helped prevent a fifth Greek-Turkish war, but more likely it was the intervention of high-ranking US diplomats and military officers that restrained itchy trigger fingers.

Recently, Turkey, following Prime Minister Erdogan’s “neo-Muslim” inclinations, has turned its attention more and more away from Western Europe and toward the Middle East. He is embracing the nations of the Arab Spring while cooling formerly good relations with Israel. Turkey has also improved its ties with Iran (that bugbear of other NATO members). In the latter case, Ankara and Teheran also have a joint interest in combating Kurdish separatists in the region they share with Iraq.

Greece, as noted earlier, plans to reduce its military commitments to NATO missions because of its continuing economic miseries. (Defense Minister Beglitis made clear, however, that the Greek military would not withdraw entirely and would continue to maintain a small presence as long as

27. “Erdogan Threatens to Freeze Ties with EU over Cyprus,” *Voice of Russia*, 16 October 2011.

the international missions continue.) Still, Greece has been one of the five alliance members to spend more than 2 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defense—in fact 3.1 percent, committing \$8.1 billion for 2011. Turkey has committed \$12 billion, or 1.6 per cent of its GDP. Meanwhile, it seems that most of the older alliance members (except France and Britain, for the moment) are suffering from what one might call “NATO fatigue.” Most refused to send their troops into combat in Afghanistan. Half the members (among them Germany) declined to participate in the campaign against Qaddafi’s Libyan forces so enthusiastically conducted by France and Britain from March to October 2011. Even the United States resisted doing more than share its sophisticated electronic weaponry and spyware to enhance the NATO airstrikes against Libya.

For decades the alliance appears to have lived by the principle of “grow or die” (the title of an analysis by George Land).<sup>28</sup> It has more than tripled in size and it is still trolling for new members like Georgia and Ukraine.

As an institution, NATO seems like a band of warriors in search of an enemy or, lacking that, some other plausible justification for its existence. But that is not an easy assignment. Al Qaeda’s terrorist formations appear too dispersed to be an object of strategizing, even for NATO globalists. And, bad as Qaddafi may have been, there do not seem to be a lot of Libyans left to liberate. What’s a good guy supposed to do if he runs out of bad guys?

28. George T. Land, *Grow or Die: The Unifying Principle of Transformation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973).