

GREECE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN A Challenging Regional Setting

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Greece, a country located at the eastern hub of a strategic theatre lying at the crossroads of three continents - Europe, Asia, and Africa - is well anchored to the European zone of peace and stability. But being at the heart of a volatile regional triangle comprising South-eastern Europe, the Middle East and the Caucasus, the Mediterranean plays a pivotal role in Greece's history, politics and society. It is also fair to say that after the Mediterranean enlargements of the European Union (EU) in the early and mid-1980s, Greece's position has enhanced further the strategic significance of the Mediterranean for Europe.

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Greece is also an integral part of the oft-troubled Balkan state system, sharing a common heritage and culture with Balkan countries and those approaching the Middle East. Greece's complex relationships with these three sets of neighbours in the Euro-Mediterranean space dominate current regional politics. The relationships between Greece, the Balkans, Turkey/Cyprus and the EU typify the challenges in seeking regional unity and co-operation. The Aegean passage constitutes an important shipping route for the transportation of energy supplies to continental Europe and since the 1990s a crucial European fault-line. After the end of the Cold War, it is repeatedly suggested that the Mediterranean constitutes a new zone of strategic and socio-economic instability, migration flows, religious and cultural conflicts, varying forms of political and economic institutions, differing perceptions of security and, above all, differing worldviews on democracy and public order, often prophesising an almost inevitable "clash" of civilisations.

Post-1989 Euro-mediterranean affairs are as full of misunderstandings about distorted perceptions and images of Islam, as they are about the threat of terrorism used by transnational extremist groups, especially post-September 11th. A short guide for security anxieties in the region includes also Turkey's question, Lebanon's struggle, Algeria's civil war, the still-open Cyprus question, the Palestinian issue, Arab-Israeli relations, pervasive economic backwardness, unequal demographic growth, rising transnational crime and the role of

the great powers in areas of long-standing rivalry and intervention.

From the early nineties, Greece exhibits a firm European orientation, being one of the firmest supporters for deeper EU integration in general, and the federalisation of the EU political system in particular. The once problematic relationship with the then European Economic Community, conceptualised along the lines of an "uneasy interdependence", is long gone. Being an integral part of the "Eurozone", and with an increasing propensity to internalising European norms, Greece strives towards a profound "deepening" of integration, especially in the fields of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), perceiving them as a prelude to a common European defence and external action.

Long-term strategic objectives of the Greek polity are, among others, to safeguard its territorial integrity (especially from the East), to further the process (but also the quality) of Europeanisation within its domestic governance structures, and to project its civilian values in its oft-troubled peripheries (in its northern borders, after the successive Balkan crisis). With Greek politics being formulated in relation to an ever globalising, if not already globalised, world, the time is ripe for the country to redefine its strategic orientation in the new multicultural settings, including the Mediterranean.

Greece maintains particular Mediterranean concerns that relate to both internal and external secu-

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ity. Its “principled” policy is guided by respect of internationally recognised borders, stability, peace, security, and full respect for human and minority rights. Despite the many complex problems faced by the littoral countries, Greek foreign policy aims to develop multilevel bilateral and multilateral links with these countries based on historical and cultural ties and affinities, as well as on common economic and commercial experience. Greece has also intensified its efforts to foster links with its southern partners, by acting as a factor of stability throughout their transitional phase. Building on the EU’s Mediterranean approach, the new regional space becomes a rediscovered land of opportunity and belonging for Greek policy-makers.

Greece has a clear interest in participating to its full capacity in the formation of a vibrant Euro-Mediterranean space with a notable potential for regional systemic change. This is crucial now that the EU is ever more closely bound to furthering the transformation of the European order post-1989, in the sense that it has not paid due attention to the pressing realities of Mediterranean security. The country which gave birth to the idea of democracy some 25 hundred years ago, and an ensemble of historically constituted cultural properties that has managed in the course of time to reconcile homogeneity and diversity, Greece today is a promising regional actor, capable of contributing further to the cooperation structures in the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean has always oc-

cupied a prominent role in the attainment of European peace due to its critical geopolitical position - the crossroad and natural bridge between three continents. Much like Europe, it is a composite of different cultures, each sharing portions of a distinctive sense of being and belonging, based on a rich body of histories, traditions and values. Mythical constructs aside, the Mediterranean is characterised by a pluricausal dynamism pushing toward a new mapping of its subunits, reformulated through a dialectical union of old stereotypes, novel ways of life, modified perceptions of belonging and an ascending pluralism in its governance structures. In this changing scenery, and against a background of unprecedented global transformations that redefine the conditions of world politics, both sides of the Mediterranean are today groping for change.

Mediterranean issues are not new, and yet, they still rest on considerable variation in the EU’s foreign policy. The extent to which the Mediterranean can be seen as a distinct region complicates further the discussion about the scope and level of a common European policy. However, post-1989, the EU has reshaped its agenda to accommodate regional transformations in its periphery. Since the launching of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in November 1995, following the adoption of the Barcelona Declaration, EU Mediterranean policy has gained both in strategic importance and, compared with previous policy regimes, internal cohesion. By putting an institutional face to a

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more balanced and comprehensive approach, the EMP became crucial to Mediterranean order-building through a principled policy orientation, based on the norms and principles of good governance.

Although security plays a highly important role in regional politics, the EMP remains a soft-power project of the EU. It has infused a degree of political bias to Euro-Mediterranean relations, whilst encompassing an ambitious economic plan for a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area by the year 2010, and a “human dimension” similar to that introduced by the Helsinki Process in 1975. The basket-based structure of the Partnership and the follow-up continuity could have proved instrumental in fostering a new co-operative ethos among its members. Interest –convergence around economic tasks usually contributes to a relaxation of tensions in areas where controversy is more likely to arise – i.e., in military security and human rights. The composite nature of this dynamic process offers a wide range of opportunities for the functionalist expectations of the countries involved to form the basis of a consensually pre-determined set of policies beneficial to an overall systemic stabilisation.

It is fair to say that the Barcelona Process has not yet fulfilled the rather high European ambitions. It did not make the leap that was politically necessary, it did not respond clearly to the great regional problems, and was unable to adopt a position regarding the grave crises affecting the region. The whole project has experienced

significant constraints, first of all, because the Barcelona Process has not helped in the resolution of any major security problem in the region. The general ability and willingness of the EU to be an active and efficient party in the regional conflicts’ resolution or, on the contrary, to choose to protect itself, to isolate itself from the overflow of violence related to these conflicts, is an important issue that explains why political and security dialogue has not been developed within the EMP. However, the “strategy” to bypass contentious issues rather than addressing them, shows that, twelve years after the launching of Barcelona Process, the need of a long-term process in the Mediterranean remains unresolved.

The basic reason why the Barcelona Process experiences constraints is because all the initial optimism that the Oslo Process produced in the early 1990s was evaporated in a violent cycle of suicidal terrorist attacks and excessive use of military force in the Palestinian territories. Since the beginning of the second Intifada in 2000, the EMP has failed to free itself from the crisis in the Middle East. As a result, the long awaited Euro-Mediterranean Charter on Peace and Stability has been stalled. The talks on Charter, which was initiated in order to implement a fully-fledged regional security regime along the lines of the Helsinki Process, have gradually shifted towards democratisation, respect of human rights and the rule of law in the South. Given this impasse, the Charter talks failed and suspended, but since the meeting in Marseilles, the EU has

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sustained its efforts to advance democracy and good governance within the EMP framework, especially after the 2004 enlargement in the context of the new European Neighbourhood Policy.

Moreover, pre-existing concerns about the low-level presence of most of the Mediterranean partners and the existing institutional weaknesses of the EMP to become a “proper” partnership have been multiplied. The initiatives remain European and this contradicts with the idea of a genuine Partnership as a way of promoting regional dialogue and a feeling of co-ownership. Although these problems will continue to have a clear spill-over effect on Arab perceptions, it is not sufficient to constantly complain that the Barcelona Process is solely a European design. There is little reason to expect that the process will become more equitable unless there are serious inputs from all partners. It is also necessary to devise ways to correct the asymmetry amongst the partners, for the EMP has become even more asymmetrical due to the EU’s eastern enlargement and the accession of Cyprus and Malta. With Turkey and Israel having special relationships with the EU and with the Arab countries now experiencing more differentiated relations with the EU under the European Neighbourhood Policy, the end result may be that just a few of them will enter into privileged relationships with the EU at the cost of the Barcelona Process.

Today the EMP faces acute challenges, both from parallel initiatives by the United States and

from the growth in the reduction of trade barriers worldwide. There are also internal challenges as the EMP adapts to the new European Neighbourhood Policy. In view of these momentous changes, there is great need for in-depth thinking about Greece’s Mediterranean role. Regarding the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy, the concept of a wider European “ring of friends” and the assorted policy are a clear result of new EU dynamics, which can be read as an attempt to buffer its external borders and not to address properly the regional socio-economic instability. The instruments of the new policy and its incentives are rather inadequate to achieve the policy objectives for the Mediterranean. In fact, it is unlikely that they will contribute to the pressing needs of the southern Mediterranean shore or that they will be helpful in connecting the EU’s eastern and southern neighbours in a sustainable way.

The Barcelona Process has been an ambitious and innovative project, yet the implementation of the follow-up mechanism has proved much too complex than initially expected. Today, although the fundamental principles and values underlying the process remain valid, certain regional and international conditions have changed, be it the recent massive enlargement of the EU, the question of Turkey’s membership, the increasing violence in the Middle East, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the wide-ranging outbreak of terrorism. There is no doubt that the implementation of the Barcelona principles need to be re-adjusted and enhanced so as to enable the EMP to face contemporary chal-

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allenges and to adapt to a modified regional and international setting.

Greece is being called upon to play an important role in promoting peace and stability in the Mediterranean, by undertaking conflict prevention initiatives and by participating in the elaboration of the EU's foreign policy. The 2003 Greek presidency of the EU renewed the interest in the initiation and the institutional consolidation of a political dialogue on matters of Mediterranean security and defence. The Greek suggestions for extra-transparency, trust-building and the institutionalisation of political dialogue in the Mediterranean enhanced the internal cohesion of both the Barcelona Process and the ESDP. Today, however, the broader redefinition of Euro-Arab relations is ever more necessary, including the escalating regional power deficit. The creation of an autonomous military capability for the EU should not obstruct the regional transformation process and the creation of a prosperous free trade region.

The question, however, remains twofold: whether the EMP can meet its prescribed ends without first transforming itself into a system of patterned behaviour, and whether the co-operative ethos embedded in the new Neighbourhood Policy can go beyond the level of contractual interstate obligations and closer to a meaningful partnership. New rules and norms have to be created, given that behaviour, not just proclamations, will determine the outcome of this regional project. In this framework it is important for the Euro-Mediterranean partners to arrive at a common ground with common definitions and responses to common anxieties related to terrorism and the fight against it, human security, civilian engagement and trust-building.

USEFUL LINKS

www.ypex.gov.gr/www.mfa.gr/en-US/Policy/Geographic+Regions/Mediterranean+-+Middle+East