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The France-Greece Partnership Beyond the Eastern Mediterranean

Dorothee SCHMID

Elisa DOMINGUES DOS SANTOS

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Ifri

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel. : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: accueil@ifri.org

Website: ifri.org

Authors

An expert on Mediterranean and Turkey issues, **Dorothee Schmid** holds a diploma in public management from Science-Po Paris and a PHD in Political Science from Panthéon-Sorbonne University. She worked as a country-risk analyst for Bank Crédit Agricole-Indosuez and carried out consulting missions for public institutions (European Commission, French Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs), as well as NGOs and private companies, before joining Ifri in 2002. Dorothee Schmid has produced extensive analysis on EU and French policies in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, the issue of induced democratization, political economy and the regional balance of powers. She has started and developed Ifri's Contemporary Turkey Program since 2008 in order to follow the transformations of Turkish politics and the rise of Turkish foreign policy in its neighborhood and beyond. Her current research focusses on the dynamics of political reforms in the Middle East, the future of the rentier-state culture, post-conflict agendas and the new competition for influence among powers in the region.

A graduate from Sciences Po Bordeaux in African Studies, **Elisa Domingues dos Santos** specialized first in West Africa, particularly in governance issues in Benin, where she lived while working for the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) in Cotonou and for which she co-produced an analysis of the Beninese trade union landscape. With experience in project management in the development aid and advocacy sector, she joined Ifri in March 2021 as Project Officer for the Sub-Saharan Africa Center and the Turkey/Middle East program.

Abstract

The bilateral defense agreement signed by France and Greece in September 2021 confirms the strategic turn of the relationship between the two countries, which was already apparent in 2020 when Paris supported Athens in countering Turkish maritime operations that France and Greece considered very hostile. This agreement confirms that the bilateral relationship is shifting towards a new balance. Greece, now out of the financial and political crisis, is becoming an attractive economic and diplomatic partner for France. Emmanuel Macron's investment in Greece strengthens the "Mediterranean option" that has been taking shape throughout the French President's term in office. On the other hand, Paris is a natural supporter for Athens, at a time when the latter is looking for reassurance and seeking to break out of its obsessive confrontation with Turkey, as well as opening up its diplomacy to new opportunities beyond its immediate scope.

Originally portrayed as a contribution to European strategic autonomy, the French-Greek Partnership perfectly fits in with the program of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU). However, the French-Greek option raises questions, concerning both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – whose clause of mutual assistance (Art. 2) implicitly relates to Turkey, which condemned the agreement – and the EU, since Germany displayed its skepticism regarding the agreement. Its stabilizing impact is therefore debatable, especially in a region currently facing very volatile conflictual reconfigurations.

Résumé

L'accord bilatéral de défense franco-grec signé en septembre 2021 confirme la tournure stratégique de la relation entre les deux pays, déjà révélée au grand jour en 2020 lorsque Paris s'était rangé du côté d'Athènes pour contrer des manœuvres maritimes turques perçues comme très hostiles. Il confirme que la relation bilatérale avance vers un nouvel équilibre. La Grèce sortie de la crise financière et politique devient pour la France un partenaire intéressant à la fois sur le plan économique et diplomatique ; l'investissement d'Emmanuel Macron sur ce pays renforce une option méditerranéenne que l'on a vu se dessiner tout au long du mandat du président français. De l'autre côté, Paris constitue un parrain naturel pour Athènes en quête de réassurance, désireuse de sortir du tête-à-tête obsessionnel avec la Turquie, et dont la diplomatie s'ouvre à de nouvelles opportunités au-delà de son périmètre immédiat.

Présenté comme une contribution à l'autonomie stratégique européenne, le partenariat franco-grec s'insère aussi parfaitement dans l'agenda de la Présidence française de l'Union européenne (UE) au premier semestre 2022. L'option franco-grecque soulève cependant des questions, aussi bien à l'Organisation du traité de l'Atlantique nord (OTAN) – la clause d'assistance mutuelle qu'il contient (Art. 2) visant implicitement Turquie, qui a condamné l'accord ; qu'au sein de l'UE – l'Allemagne s'est aussi montrée critique. La portée stabilisatrice de l'accord peut ainsi être discutée, dans une région en proie à des recompositions conflictuelles très volatiles.

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Introduction¹

By signing a bilateral defense agreement in Paris on September 28, 2021, Greece and France confirmed that their long-standing political partnership was taking a strategic turn. The agreement was accompanied by a memorandum of understanding signed by the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of the French companies Naval Group and MBDA, providing for the Hellenic Navy's acquisition of three French-made "defence and intervention frigates", just months after the finalization of a first contract for the purchase of 18 *Rafale* fighter jets for the Hellenic Air Force, which was followed by an order for six additional aircraft on September 12.

The defense agreement between Greece and its commercial partner seems to fit naturally into a vision of the Mediterranean region that is frequently promoted in French diplomatic discourse, and which Emmanuel Macron has taken up and gradually strengthened. The eastern component of this renewed Mediterranean policy has rapidly come to be structured, both diplomatically and militarily, in response to a growing number of risks: instability in Syria and the inexorable deterioration of the situation in Lebanon; the competing and potentially conflictual ambitions of Iran, the Gulf monarchies and Turkey; gas disputes; the recurrence of Greek-Turkish tensions; and uncertainties about the future of Northern Cyprus.

The convergence of views between Paris and Athens on these various subjects now seems to be well established, but the concrete basis for this rapprochement was the general apprehension regarding Turkey when, in summer 2020, Emmanuel Macron sided with Greece, which was then worried by Ankara's actions in its maritime neighborhood. The French President firmly defended a policy of containment in response to Turkish expansionism, which was viewed by French officials as being systematic and particularly dangerous. The French-Greek defense agreement, presented in Paris as a step forward on the road to European strategic autonomy, therefore implicitly designates Turkey as the problem, and Article 2 of the agreement contains a mutual assistance clause² whose precise implications have yet to be tested by actual events. While acting as

1. The Center for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the German Federal Foreign Office. CATS organizes the "CATS Network", an international network of think tanks and research institutes working on Turkey. This publication is part of the project "The Search for Franco-German Consensus on the Eastern Mediterranean: The Paris/Ankara Row and its Consequences for the EU", which is led by the CATS network.

2. "The Entire France-Greek Defense and Security Agreement", *The Greek Reporter*, September 28, 2021, available at: www.greekreporter.com.

an instrument of reassurance for Greece,³ the agreement is also an assertion of French power in relation to Turkey, and the latter has denounced it as a breach of the regional status quo that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is trying to preserve at all costs, since the protagonists of this vicious triangle are all members of NATO. In any case, the text adds a new layer to the patchwork of regional political and institutional balances and is not unanimously supported in Europe. As the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union gets underway, it seems useful to question the short-term motivations and long-term objectives of this French-Greek partnership.

3. B. Tertrais, “Reassurance and Deterrence in the Mediterranean: The Franco-Greek Defense Deal”, *Institut Montaigne*, November 17, 2021.

France's Strategic Concerns in the Mediterranean

The meaning of the French-Greek rapprochement must be interpreted in the context of a whole series of major initiatives in the Mediterranean region, where the strategic balance has been significantly disrupted over the past ten years. As a longstanding Mediterranean power, Emmanuel Macron's France is engaged in a new effort of doctrinal and logistical restructuring in this sphere.

The Recognition of a Disrupted Balance in the Mediterranean

Over the past ten years, the Eastern Mediterranean has been the scene of multifaceted strategic reconfigurations with consequences beyond the area itself. The European Union (EU) has looked on helplessly as fragile geopolitical balances have deteriorated; Brexit and the withdrawal of the United States (US) have meant that the EU is left alone to deal with problems on a scale that exceeds its capacity to react, while the relative power vacuum has precipitated the arrival in the regional landscape of other, not necessarily friendly, actors (Russia, China). The growing number of conflicts, the increase in migratory movements and the exportation of terrorism are of concern to all European states, but no adequate collective solutions have yet been found.

The French President himself has recognized that the Mediterranean is "in turmoil"; he made this point at length in a speech delivered at the opening of the Middle East Mediterranean Summer Summit in Lugano in August 2020, where he presented not only his diagnosis of the situation but also his vision of France's role in the region. Emmanuel Macron noted that there is a "reorganization of this entire space under way" in a context of tensions that are fueled, in his view, by four elements: the religious situation, the demographic situation, the energy situation and political dynamics. He condemned "the return of imperial powers" justified by "a fantasy version of their own history", and specifically mentioned Turkey in this regard, before outlining a path of renewed multilateralism initiated by France, citing as an important milestone the "Summit of the Two Shores,

Mediterranean Forum”, which he himself had organized in June 2019 in Marseille.⁴

There were some specific concerns regarding the Eastern Mediterranean that prompted this speech, which was delivered at the height of summer tensions with Turkey, and just weeks after the explosion that devastated the port of Beirut in August 2020. Emmanuel Macron noted that the Syrian and Libyan conflicts had paved the way for Russia and Turkey to establish a physical presence in areas from which they had long been absent, and had facilitated the growth of radical jihadist groups. The escalation of the Lebanese crisis also brought the issue of migration back to the fore, while the March 2016 agreement signed between the EU and Turkey gave the latter *de facto* control over migratory movements in the Eastern Mediterranean. But above all, the huge gas resources discovered since 2009 in this same space had reactivated longstanding disputes over maritime boundaries between Israel and Lebanon, Greece and Turkey, and around the divided Cyprus. The revisionist ambitions of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had repeatedly declared the Treaty of Lausanne to be “null and void”,⁵ were all the more concerning to the French President as they were now integrated in the strategic doctrine of a Turkish “Blue Homeland” (*Mavi Vatan*), which was being used to justify the pursuit of increased maritime sovereignty.⁶

This speech, delivered to academics, was more concerned with current events than with history; nevertheless, it included a tribute to the Hellenic heritage found in “this part of the world that has so much history, that has been the site of so many dramas, that is still enriched by Greek tragedy”. From the point of view of Emmanuel Macron’s intellectual toolkit, the Mediterranean is thus one of the topics that can be mobilized to construct a global and harmonious historical narrative, a task that he has attempted elsewhere on narrower and undoubtedly more difficult issues (Rwanda, Algeria).⁷ In other contexts, Emmanuel Macron has idealized the Mediterranean in ecological terms: he has hailed it as a “treasure to be preserved” by launching the “Coalition for an exemplary Mediterranean in 2030”, which was spearheaded by France, Monaco and Spain during the

4. Speech delivered by French President Emmanuel Macron at the Middle East Mediterranean Summer Summit in Lugano, available at: www.elysee.fr.

5. The Treaty of Lausanne, the last peace treaty resulting from the First World War, replaced the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres in 1923 and defined the borders of modern Turkey, which were then limited to eastern and western Anatolia and eastern Thrace. It definitively cut off the Ottoman Empire from territories in Cyprus, the Dodecanese, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan and Arabia. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan not only challenges the despised (although never implemented) Treaty of Sèvres, but now contests the validity of the Treaty of Lausanne itself.

6. A. Denizeau, “*Mavi Vatan*, la ‘Patrie bleue’: origines, influence et limites d’une doctrine ambitieuse pour la Turquie”, *Études de l’Ifri*, Ifri, April 2021.

7. E. Laurentin, “Le refoulé de l’Histoire: la politique mémorielle d’Emmanuel Macron”, *Esprit*, October 2021, available at: esprit.presse.fr.

One Planet Summit in January 2021.⁸ The Mediterranean has thus regained its traditional role for French diplomacy as an ideal support for political, methodological or simply discursive experiments. Other presidents have taken advantage of this versatility before Emmanuel Macron.

The Voluntarist Leadership of Emmanuel Macron

The Mediterranean political project resurfaces regularly on the French diplomatic horizon when the relevant circumstances arise, and the idea of the Mediterranean that has been cultivated in Paris since the nineteenth century confers on the French a sort of traditional political leadership in this space.⁹ By returning – wholeheartedly and with an effective communication strategy – to these somewhat outdated frameworks of conducting European affairs, Emmanuel Macron is therefore following in the footsteps of his predecessors: both those of Jacques Chirac (under whose presidency the Barcelona Process was launched in 1995, creating the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, or EuroMed) and of Nicolas Sarkozy (who reinvented EuroMed by launching the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008). Since the beginning of his presidency, Emmanuel Macron has made use of the variety of existing formats, while also making marginal improvements to them: the “Summit of the Two Shores, Mediterranean Forum”, convened in 2019 in Marseille and followed up by the “Dialogue of the Two Shores” (focused on the role of civil society) in June 2019, also in Marseille, developed the framework of the 5+5 Dialogue, which had been active since 1990; a “Summit of the Southern EU countries”, an offshoot of the informal EuroMed 7 group set up in Athens in 2016, took place in September 2020 in Ajaccio, and was convened again in Athens in September 2021; a “Summit of the Mediterranean Worlds” is still on the agenda of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, to be held in February 2022 in Marseille.

These formats are sufficiently varied and flexible to meet the needs of the particular diplomatic situations that may arise. The 5+5 Dialogue and its avatars ensure a regular monitoring of issues in the western Mediterranean, which corresponds more to French areas of influence (the countries of the Maghreb, acting as a gateway to Africa). But the spike in tensions with Turkey in the summer of 2020 established the Eastern Mediterranean as an object of geopolitical interest in its own right: it is now seen by the French as a test case for aggressive neo-Ottomanism at the borders of Europe, specifically in Greece and Cyprus. An alliance of Southern European countries is thus emerging, forming a bridge between

8. Available at: www.twitter.com.

9. D. Schmid: “Méditerranée: le retour des Français?”, *Confluences Méditerranée*, Vol. 63, No. 4, 2007, pp. 13-23.

the Western and Eastern Mediterranean, which Paris is strengthening by signing bilateral treaties with Greece and Italy. Indeed, France aims to position itself as a structuring actor in the region, both for its own interests and as an active representative of the EU, which it feels obliged to embody when there is a threat of conflict. As it has always done since the 1970s, it is thus striving to build a network of alliances that combine its national interests and those of the EU, so as to better face whatever difficulties may arise in the Middle East and Africa. In this search for partners, which may include Egypt, Israel and the Gulf monarchies, Greece has rapidly assumed greater importance.

The Global Ambitions of the French-Greek Rapprochement

Commenting on the French-Greek bilateral agreement, the French ambassador in Athens spoke of a “French-Greek partnership [...] with a structuring role”, extending well beyond the domain of defense in a narrow sense.¹⁰ Indeed, the interests of the two countries converge on many points, some of which are obvious, while others are less so.

On the French Side: Greece as a Multi-Task Partner

Since 2020, France has been experiencing a new wave of philhellenism, which is probably reinforced by the growing sense of unease with regard to Turkey – which the latter frequently characterizes as Turkophobia.¹¹ Sympathy for Greece stems first of all from an imaginary of the ancient world; it then draws on the memory of empathy for the Greek national struggle at the beginning of the nineteenth century – the bicentenary of Greek independence was celebrated with distinction by a dedicated exhibition at the Louvre in 2021 – and on the memory of shared causes throughout the twentieth century: the two nations were allies in the two World Wars, and France played a prominent role in helping to bring Greece into the EU. There is a rich repertoire of shared symbolism that is always presented with care by the French. Thus, when Emmanuel Macron went to Athens in September 2017 for his first official trip as President, he chose as his setting, like André Malraux sixty years before him, the Pnyx hill, which in ancient times was the site of the Assembly of the citizens of Athens, with the Parthenon in the background; numerous images were then broadcast of the President, in this grandiose location, delivering a speech on the revival of Europe, in which he made an idealistic appeal combining a call for sovereignty and the defense of democracy.¹² As it is a trademark of this young, reformist President to modernize the symbols at his disposal, it is worth noting his performance in a 30-minute interview in March 2021 on the Greek television channel EPT, marking Greece’s bicentenary, in which

10. Opinion piece by P. Maisonave published in the Greek daily newspaper *TO VIMA*, November 11, 2021, available at: www.tovima.gr.

11. See Ö. K. Sirene, “Comprendre la turcophobie en France (étude)”, TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation), November 7, 2019, available at: www.trt.net.tr.

12. C. Ducourtieux and S. de Royer, “Macron esquisse à Athènes sa relance de l’Europe”, *Le Monde*, September 8, 2017, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

he confided to the Nikos Aliagas, a French-Greek journalist and prominent media personality in France, that he “takes solace” in difficult moments “in the Parmenidian equivalence”.¹³

When the French President received a visit from the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in September 2021, the aim was to seal a strategic partnership that went beyond these scholarly exchanges. Nicolas Sarkozy had already proposed, as early as 2008, a “new alliance” with Greece, which he saw as a pillar of his Union for the Mediterranean,¹⁴ but the economic crisis of 2008 got the better of this ambition. Arriving after these troubles had passed, Emmanuel Macron was able to seize the moment when Athens ceased to be a mere receptacle of European solidarity and was becoming once again a full-fledged partner. Greece’s added value can now be measured favorably on three levels: economic, political and geopolitical.

On the economic front, it is well known that China had identified a weakened Greece as an entry point into Europe in its Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁵ Having emerged from its financial crisis, Greece is now once again a land of opportunity for Europeans themselves, against a backdrop of growing tensions with Beijing. Athens is also better disposed towards Paris than towards Berlin, as the latter had been excessively reluctant to mobilize European resources to ensure the financial rescue of Greece. It was in these favorable circumstances that Emmanuel Macron made his move, bringing to Athens, during his official visit in 2017, some forty leaders of large French companies, including several from the CAC 40 (Total, Vinci), as well as promising small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups. In terms of large contracts, the energy sector (Total, Engie) was interested in Greek gas deposits, but from 2020 onward it would be French arms companies that would benefit most spectacularly from the French-Greek rapprochement. Greece, now governed by the political right wing, wished to renew its military equipment and restore its defense budget, which had been cut substantially over the ten years of economic crisis.¹⁶ France then offered its services to help them catch up in terms of military technology. The Greek-Turkish crisis in the summer of 2020 brought the issue of *Rafale* fighter jets to the fore, with the deployment of two of these aircraft in Cyprus for an exercise designed to impress the Turks. Kyriakos Mitsotakis then decided to

13. L. Laffon, “Cette interview au cours de laquelle Emmanuel Macron et Nikos Aliagas rivalisent de mots savants et parlent en grec est absolument folle”, *GQ Magazine*, March 27, 2021, available at: www.gqmagazine.fr.

14. On this occasion Nicolas Sarkozy referred to the affection he had felt as a child for his grandfather, who was born in Thessaloniki; P. Prier, “Paris offre à Athènes ‘une nouvelle alliance’”, *Le Figaro*, June 7, 2008, available at: www.lefigaro.fr.

15. G. Fabre, “Les Nouvelles routes de la soie et la Grèce, tête de pont de la présence chinoise en Europe”, *ILCEA*, No. 37, 2019.

16. The defense budget was increased by 43% in 2020 and 57% in 2021. The relative level of Greek military spending in relation to the country’s GNP is high: second among NATO members. See S. Atlamazoglou, “Which NATO Members Spend the Most on Defense? No. 2 May Surprise You”, *The National Interest*, available at: www.nationalinterest.org.

buy 18 of them for the Hellenic Air Force, for a total of 2.5 billion euros – an order that was extended a year later to include six additional aircraft. This first contract with a European country was a major success for Dassault, after years of painstaking work in bringing this very expensive aircraft to market.¹⁷ In the fall of 2021, Naval Group announced the sale of three Belharra frigates to Greece (with an option for one more), for a reported 3 billion euros, including the supply of missiles and torpedoes (MBDA missiles and Eurotorp torpedoes) and maintenance over three years. The frigates are to be assembled in Lorient, thus providing an essential symbolic compensation for this group, which been badly impacted by the termination of the historic Australian submarine contract a few weeks earlier.

Greece is finally not only a client, but also a stable political partner. The Greek political landscape has normalized after a series of political challenges: although Syriza, theoretically a party of the far left, was in power at the time when it had to implement the austerity measures imposed by Brussels, the pattern of political alternation brought the classic right-wing party Nea Demokratia back into power in 2019 – a longstanding party which was already in power at the time of Greece’s democratic transition in 1974, and which made for an ideal sparring partner for Emmanuel Macron. The neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, which first entered the parliament in 2012, was outlawed in 2020 for belonging to a criminal organization; Greek politics are now back on track.

Finally, in the space of a few years, Athens has shown an exceptional capacity to absorb geopolitical shocks: after the shock of the financial crisis, its resilience in the face of the Syrian migration crisis has been remarkable. The peaceful resolution of the dispute with Northern Macedonia has helped to detach Athens from Russian influence,¹⁸ and shown that the country is playing its role as the EU’s border with the Balkans and the Middle East without major drama. Greece is situated in close proximity to all the region’s hotspots: Lebanon, which is in the process of breaking apart, Syria, which has not yet been reconstructed, and an increasingly threatening Turkey, which has involved Greece in the Libyan crisis through a disastrous maritime agreement. It is potentially becoming a pivotal country once again, and the new right-wing majority that leads it is willing to support France’s efforts to rebuild the regional order.

In recognition of this new status, Emmanuel Macron invited Athens to participate in the conference on Libya held in Paris in November 2021, thereby making the Greeks full partners in this affair for which he was

17. Interview with the French Minister of the Armed Forces, Florence Parly: “La France est heureuse d’exporter le *Rafale* pour la première fois en Europe”, by A. Bauer, *Les Échos*, January 29, 2021, available at: www.lesechos.fr. However, Dassault has a long-standing relationship with Athens, which acquired Mirage aircraft in the 1970s for reasons of sovereignty.

18. B. Cadène, “Face aux pressions russes, la Macédoine du Nord demande l’aide de l’OTAN”, *France Culture*, June 6, 2020.

heavily criticized and found himself implicitly opposed to Germany's position. The intervention of the Germans on issues of the Eastern Mediterranean regularly causes friction between Paris and Berlin, who are particularly opposed to each other on the issue of Turkey.¹⁹ The uncertainties of the coalition after Angela Merkel's departure militate all the more for a rebalancing of the Mediterranean. The reconciliation between France and Mario Draghi's Italy, sealed in November 2021 with the signing of the Quirinal Treaty "for a strengthened bilateral cooperation" – the institutional equivalent of the French-German Elysée Treaty of 1963 – thus marked the completion of Emmanuel Macron's Mediterranean project.²⁰ These Mediterranean agreements provide essential foundations in support of the agenda of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which involves bringing to the fore the issue of European strategic autonomy; the military aspect of the French-Greek agreement is of primary importance here, as it is presented as a pillar of strategic autonomy.

On the Greek Side: Reaching a Successful Outcome in the Mediterranean

"Greece, France, Alliance!": Greek Francophilia is the counterpart to French philhellenism. The Greek press have once again taken up this slogan, which was used in July 1974, just after the liberation of Athens from the military dictatorship, to welcome the return of the Greek Prime Minister Constantin Caramanlis aboard the French presidential plane loaned by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. This historic Francophile attitude, which has never been contested, is now being enthusiastically revived: Greece, under pressure from the nationalist coalition in power in Turkey, is seeking reassurance, and France is playing the role of white knight.

The philhellenic fervor of Paris compensates for the hardships imposed by Berlin, which Athens has not forgotten. Across all political discourse in Greece, the benevolence shown by the French is thus systematically highlighted in opposition to repeated treachery on the part of the Germans: recollection of the shared struggle against the Nazis during the Second World War is usually followed by a reminder of Angela Merkel's hostile attitude during the financial crisis, at which point there was talk in Athens of demanding war reparations from Berlin.²¹ More problematic today is the

19. L. L. Kabis-Kechrid, "Conflicts in the EastMed: From Germany's and France's Conflicting Strategies to a Dual Approach", *Briefings de l'Ifri*, Ifri, September 3, 2021.

20. O. Tossier, "Le Traité du Quirinal scelle l'amitié retrouvée entre la France et l'Italie", *Les Échos*, November 26, 2021, available at: www.lesechos.fr.

21. Interviews conducted by the authors with several Greek politicians and journalists, Athens, October 2021. See also E. Perriguer, "Entre la Grèce et l'Allemagne, une relation ancienne et tumultueuse", *Le Monde*, February 25, 2015, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

perception that Germany's attitude is pro-Turkish. Germany's defense of a dogma of maintaining balance in the Eastern Mediterranean, together with its continuing practice of selling military equipment to Turkey and its measured attitude and desire for mediation at the height of the crisis in the summer of 2020, all appear as reprehensible weakness in the era of the "Mavi Vatan". There is also criticism of how casually the German Chancellor handed authority to the Turks in handling the situation of Syrian migration – thereby "forgetting" that Greece was once again directly subject to Ankara's calculated whims.

The increase in pressure from Turkey is leading Greece to focus all its surveillance, planning and security response resources in the Aegean, and in this situation the only prospect for change seems to lie in an expansion of the problems in the Eastern Mediterranean, through the issue of Cyprus. Greece feels trapped on all sides by Turkey: aside from the struggle for sovereignty in the literal sense in the Aegean, the confrontation with Turkey is also preventing it from exploiting newly discovered gas reserves in the area. Athens's new priority is therefore that of breaking out of its obsessive confrontation with Turkey. In order to reach a successful outcome for the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, it must set itself new objectives and find new partners. France is therefore becoming involved at a time when Greece is undergoing a change in its strategic culture, rediscovering a form of extroversion through which it is bringing a number of diplomatic issues into alignment in order to escape its isolation.²²

The Greeks' new dynamic of alliance-building therefore pursues two distinct but functionally linked objectives: deterrence in the Eastern Mediterranean and elevating its own status beyond this immediate sphere. Apart from the coup of the agreement with the French, the long-standing strategic partnership with the US has been revived, ties with Israel have been strengthened, and some Arab countries are entering the new sphere of Greek socialization – a change that has been facilitated by the signing of the Abraham agreements.²³ To this end, the Greeks have worked to create the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, established since September 2019 in Cairo, which now includes Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and finally France, which joined in March 2021. This Forum is devoted to the construction of an EastMed gas pipeline that would bring gas from the Leviathan gas field in Israel to Cyprus and Greece, and then via Italy to the rest of Southern Europe. This geopolitically complex project has generated major efforts to overcome legal issues, including the signing of a maritime demarcation agreement between Greece and Egypt in August 2020, aimed at countering Turkish attempts to appropriate parts of Greek waters.

22. A. Marghelis, "La nouvelle stratégie régionale de la Grèce", *Brief de la FMES*, April 6, 2021, available at: www.fmes-france.org.

23. Y. Guzansky and G. Lindenstrauss, "The Growing Alignment Between the Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean", *MEI Brief*, May 25, 2021, available at: www.mei.edu.

Greece's openness towards Arab countries is also underpinned by initiatives such as the *Philia* ("friendship") Forum, which brought together representatives from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in Athens in February 2021, and was presented by the Greek Foreign Ministry as an attempt to build "a bridge between Europe and the Middle East".²⁴ Iraq has also entered into the picture with the opening of a Greek consulate in Erbil in July 2021, and the announcement of a forthcoming visit to Baghdad by Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis. On the Iranian issue, the Greeks openly show their support for Saudi positions; in Libya they had taken a position against Fayeze el-Sarraj in opposition to the Turks. Taking note of the reestablishment of the power of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, they chose to reopen their embassy in Damascus in 2021.

These diplomatic overtures are laying the foundations for a multilateral agreement that is implicitly defensive against the Turks, since at this stage the common factor between all partners concerned is that they all have troubled relations with Ankara. These diplomatic initiatives also have a military component: in 2020, Greece concluded a defense agreement with the United Arab Emirates that includes a mutual assistance clause; in April 2021, at the request of the US, it signed an agreement with Riyadh that provides for the dispatch of Patriot missiles and about 100 officers of the Hellenic Air Force to secure Saudi oil sites. A defense agreement with Israel signed in early 2021 provides for the opening of a flight school for the Hellenic Air Force. Military cooperation with Egypt has also deepened since President al-Sissi came to power in 2013.

The Greek strategic landscape is thus gradually expanding, allowing Athens to play a role beyond its usual sphere of engagement. Greece is becoming involved in issues that were previously alien to it: it is turning to Africa, where, after joining the French Conference for Libya, it announced at the end of 2021 that it would send fifty of its special forces to join the European Takuba Task Force, which is integrated into the French Operation Barkhane. This decision, which has now lapsed owing to the announcement of the end of Operation Barkhane, was an obvious counterpart to the defense agreement signed with Paris. Taking note of developments in American strategic doctrine, Athens has also indicated its interest in developments in the Indo-Pacific, where there is a large Greek diaspora (in Australia). The Chinese economic presence in Greece makes this issue very sensitive, but the center-right majority has now adopted a policy of rapprochement with India.²⁵

24. A. Athanasopolous, "Philia Forum a 'bridge' between Europe, Mideast: Greek Official", *Arab News*, February 17, 2021, available at: www.arabnews.com.

25. "Greek and Indian FM's Sign New Agreement, Discussions on East Med and Indo-Pacific Regions", *Greek City Times*, June 26, 2021, available at: www.greekcitytime.com.

The Implicit Decoupling of the Cyprus Question

While engaged in this complex exercise in extraversion, the Greeks would like to be able to decouple the insoluble Cyprus question from their own confrontation with Ankara. In general, and in the absence of progress in negotiations for the reunification of the island, which has been divided since 1974, the Europeans as a whole would prefer to maintain the existing status quo. However, Turkey condemns this frozen situation and is pressing its advantage on the ground in the north of the island, where its army is still stationed. Having clearly understood the explosive significance of the Cyprus issue for the EU, Ankara has in fact been strengthening its hand in Northern Cyprus for several years now, consolidating a pseudo-state that it alone recognizes and which is reliant on Turkey for everything.²⁶ This Turkish strategy has involved the return of investment to Northern Cyprus, the planning of infrastructure, including military, the highly publicized reopening of the Greek seaside resort of Varosha, which had previously been kept unoccupied in view of a possible exchange of territory upon completion of a peace deal, and interference in electoral processes – the last “presidential” election saw the return to power of a pro-Erdoğan candidate... Furthermore, since the inter-Cypriot talks of April 2021 Ankara has openly supported a two-state solution for the island.²⁷ This new dynamic is particularly disturbing for Greece, which, along with the UK and Turkey, has been responsible for guaranteeing the sovereignty of Cyprus since the island’s independence in 1960.

The Greek Cypriots, who joined the EU in 2004, where they officially represent the whole island, are well aware of the weakness of their geographical position – within reach of Turkey and facing the coasts of Syria and Lebanon – and would want to continue to benefit from the support of Greece. In principle, the historical, ethnic and linguistic ties between the two countries link their destinies together, and Nicosia wishes to count on Athens even in the event of a military incident with Turkey. However, the mounting pressure in the north of the island is now resulting in increasing numbers of incidents between the two Cypriot communities, both along the land border and at sea. The exploration and development of offshore gas reserves is a source of ongoing disputes, and the growing flow of illegal migrants trying to cross from the north of the territory to the Republic of Cyprus is also increasing tensions – with Nicosia accusing Ankara of deliberately sending Syrian refugees in its direction.

26. D. Schmid and Y. Dahech, “La méthode turque en Méditerranée: l’emprise sur Chypre-Nord”, *Briefings de l’Ifri*, Ifri, July 21, 2021, available at: www.ifri.org.

27. H. S. Özertem, “Retour aux ‘traditions’: l’évolution du positionnement turc à propos du conflit chypriote”, *Notes de l’Ifri*, Ifri, July 2021, available at: www.ifri.org.

These deteriorating conditions are pushing Cypriots to make new strategic calculations. The continued existence of the British military bases of Akrotiri and Dhekelia in the south of Cyprus certainly poses a political problem in terms of sovereignty, but also provides a deterrent effect; these bases are a fundamental asset for the “Global Britain” model of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, which will remain unaffected by post-Brexit arrangements.²⁸ Cyprus, which is not a member of NATO, is trying to develop its role as a European security hub in contact with the Middle East, but knows that it is fundamentally fragile and remains in search of a partner to guarantee its security. Cypriot officials are keen to highlight the growing number of French military vessels visiting their ports, and wish to increase this presence. They too are therefore now indicating their political openness towards Paris, as a way of overcoming their insecurity.²⁹

28. These bases, covering 3% of the Cypriot territory, contain 3,500 troops. They serve as a transit point for the deployment of British and American forces in the Middle East (Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan), and also host listening stations for gathering intelligence on the entire Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Balkans as part of the ECHELON program.

29. Interviews conducted by the authors with Cypriot officials, Paris and Nicosia, October and November 2021.

The Future of the French-Greek Agreement: Scope and Subtext

The honeymoon period of the French-Greek rapprochement took place in a context that was saturated with interests, which variously either disrupted or overlapped with other partnerships. The question of this arrangement's effectiveness is still unclear, especially since its final intentions remain, probably deliberately, rather vague.

The Delicate Balance of European Interests

The French have highlighted the usefulness of the French-Greek agreement for the EU, yet some European partners have remained skeptical.

There is clear unease on the German side. The differences between Paris and Berlin are linked to their different assessments of regional balances, but also to the commercial competition between their respective arms industries, along with a relative doctrinal divergence concerning the regulation of arms exports in general. Germany has traditionally sold significant volumes of arms to Turkey: in 2019 it still provided one-third of total Turkish arms purchases, making Ankara the largest customer of the German defense industry within NATO.³⁰ However, arms contracts to Turkey have already been blocked in response to diplomatic crises. For example, at the end of 2019 Berlin and Paris pledged to no longer supply Turkey with weapons that could be used against the former's Kurdish allies in the anti-Daesh coalition.³¹ However, exports of maritime equipment remain unaffected, and this is what is causing friction in the context of tensions in the Aegean Sea. At issue is the delivery of six Type 214T submarines to Ankara by German manufacturer ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems, under a contract approved by the German government in 2009. The first of these submarines under construction at the Turkish shipyard in Gölcük, the TCG Pirireis, was launched in December 2019, with the stated goal of launching one additional unit per year. From the Greek point of view, this procurement program is putting the Turkish Navy in a position of

30. "German Arms Exports to Turkey at Highest Level since 2005", *Deutsche Welle*, December 17, 2019, available at: www.dw.com.

31. "L'Allemagne et la France suspendent leurs ventes d'armes à la Turquie", *AFP*, reprinted by *Les Échos*, October 12, 2019, available at: www.lesechos.fr.

strength, which is unacceptable in view of its behavior in the region. Athens therefore urgently called for a European embargo on all arms destined for Turkey in 2020, but Berlin flatly rejected this proposal. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas called the Greek demand “strategically incorrect”, insisting that his country has a “restrictive and responsible” arms export policy and that the crisis must be resolved “by diplomatic means”.³² While the Greeks expressed their disappointment at this, the Turks still complained that they were subject to “an embargo in all but name” from Europeans³³ (on other types of armaments), and above all condemned in strong terms the contracts for military equipment signed between France and Greece, threatening to retaliate against the French firms in question.³⁴

Beyond the commercial success represented by the sale of *Rafale* and frigates, Emmanuel Macron and Kyriakos Mitsotakis hailed the French-Greek defense agreement as “a bold first step toward European strategic autonomy”. This ambitious objective, which is a declared priority of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, is still slow to take shape, and the formal support of the Greeks in this respect is important. To bolster his project, the French President is working closely with the most willing European partners: Croatia’s formalization of a contract to buy 12 *Rafale*, in November 2021, on the eve of the signing of the Quirinal Treaty, marked a step in this direction. This system of bold bi-multilateralism within the EU may continue to bother Germany, which is still rather wary of the concept of strategic autonomy in its military aspect, preferring to focus instead on the economic aspect that consists in the reorganization of value chains. Central Europe, especially Poland, but also the Baltic and Scandinavian states, is strongly attached to NATO’s presence in Europe as a means of countering the Russian threat. It fears above all a loss of strategic commitment on the part of the US, and interprets these French initiatives as a new blow to the Alliance.³⁵ Other EU member states, such as Belgium, support the principle of European strategic autonomy but continue to look to the US for military equipment.

Strategic Inadequacy in NATO and the American Position

The weakening of cohesion among its members is today the main problem faced by NATO, even though it is due to deliver a new “strategic concept” in

32. “Germany Opposes Arms Embargo against Turkey”, *Al Monitor*, December 22, 2020, available at: www.al-monitor.com.

33. “Turkey Facing Informal Arms Embargo from Germany: Defense Minister”, *Duvar English*, September 15, 2021, available at: www.duvarenglish.com.

34. S. Özel and S. Ülgen, “France and Greece in a Defense Partnership: A View from Turkey”, Institut Montaigne, November 2021.

35. F. Mauro, “L’autonomie stratégique, cet obscur objet du désir”, IRIS, October 2021.

the summer of 2022, bringing together a shared vision of the threats, objectives and future directions of the Alliance.

For several decades now, NATO has been the sounding board for the territorial dispute between Greece and Turkey, both of which have been members of the Alliance since they joined at the same time in 1952. While the Mediterranean area itself is a well-established subject of concern for NATO, which even aimed to address it with a dedicated initiative for dialogue with third countries as early as the 1990s, the rise in intensity of intra-NATO tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean now constitutes a truly existential problem.³⁶ While deconfliction mechanisms are working, with relative success, to reduce the risk of incidents between Greeks and Turks, the implicit confrontation between France and Turkey poses a new problem. In November 2019, Emmanuel Macron described NATO as experiencing “brain death” in response to the behavior of its American and Turkish partners in Syria;³⁷ in the spring of 2020, the Turkish and French navies came close to engaging in a confrontation off the coast of Libya, revealing the growing military rivalry between the two countries in the Mediterranean area;³⁸ at the time, Paris received only half-hearted support from other NATO allies.

Contrary to French expectations, NATO has tended until now to minimize differences and to accommodate as far as possible the attitude of the Turks, whose military weight counts for a great deal: Turkey maintains the second largest army in NATO in terms of manpower, it has acquired recent combat experience in several theaters and is equipping itself with increasingly effective equipment, manufactured by its own defense industry. Added to this is Ankara’s firmness in defending its national positions, using its proximity to Russia as leverage. When Angela Merkel ruled out suspending the delivery of German submarines to Turkey, she spoke explicitly about the “strategic dependencies” within NATO. She wanted to avoid offending a member of the Alliance that had demonstrated its readiness to retaliate as early as 2017 by procuring weapons systems (S400 anti-missile missiles) from the Russians, and then blocking in 2019 the Alliance’s defense plan for Poland and the Baltic States.

Meanwhile, Washington is attempting to permanently rebalance the region by making pledges in turn to both the Greeks and the Turks. Although Turkish-American relations became progressively more strained under the presidency of Donald Trump, Joe Biden would ideally like to

36. J. Solana, “NATO and the Mediterranean”, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, March 1997, pp. 11-20.

37. In the fall of 2019, the US announced the redeployment of its troops stationed in northern Syria. A few weeks later, Turkey launched a military operation in the area against fighters from the YPG (People’s Protection Units) and the PYD (Democratic Union Party), which are allied with the West in the fight against Daesh in Syria, and considered terrorist organizations by Ankara.

38. J. Jabbour, “A Geopolitical Rivalry Between a ‘Keeper’ of the Old Order and a Challenging Emergent Power”, *Briefings de l’Ifri*, Ifri, May 6, 2021, available at: www.ifri.org.

renew relations with Tayyip Erdoğan. Indeed, Turkey is an almost essential intermediary in the Middle East for the world's leading power, which is pursuing its policy of gradual disengagement from the area. For example, the failed preparations for the American withdrawal from Afghanistan hinged on the question of maintaining a Turkish presence to ensure the security of Kabul airport, a prospect that was ultimately rebuffed by the Taliban; if the deal had worked, it would have allowed NATO to keep a foot in the door in Afghanistan. Yet the challenge for Washington is also to prevent Turkey and Russia from getting along too well, and to monitor the intermittent overtures of Turkish diplomacy towards China and Iran. At the same time, the US affirms Greece's status as both a key ally and a frontline country: in October 2021, shortly after the signing of the French-Greek agreement, the US renewed its own mutual defense agreement with Greece, which dates back to 1990, for five years, this time with a tacit renewal clause. The new version of the partnership further expands the use of Greek bases for the US military; the accompanying diplomatic announcements emphasized the "daily provocations" that Greece faces and the need to protect its sovereignty, without ever directly mentioning Turkey.³⁹

As in the case of the French-Greek partnership, the strategic discussion was accompanied by a commercial negotiation. Greece agreed to modernize its fleet of F16 fighter jets, purchase combat helicopters and take an option on American F35 stealth fighters. However, in early December 2021, two months after Athens had announced the purchase of the French frigates, the US State Department announced that it had pre-approved the sale to Greece of four MMSC (Multi-Mission Surface Combatant) frigates developed by Lockheed Martin, with a formidable range of weaponry (missiles, torpedoes and a 76mm main gun), at a cost of nearly \$7 billion. In a political climate still clouded by the AUKUS affair, this announcement caused alarm in Paris. France went as far as to declare the American proposal "null and void", while Athens reaffirmed that the French contract was still valid. This latest episode demonstrates the weakening of trust that has occurred between NATO allies in an explosive geopolitical context: the pursuit of a joint regional security strategy is running up against many obstacles. Similarly, the official withdrawal of the State Department's support for the EastMed gas pipeline project, announced on January 9, 2022, can be interpreted as a piece of the delicate puzzle of balances in the Eastern Mediterranean as perceived from Washington. Although this decision was officially based on doubts about the commercial feasibility of the project, it was nonetheless perceived on the Greek side as a move in favor of the Turks, thus demonstrating the use by the US of transactional diplomacy in the region.

39. L. Lagneau, "La Grèce et les États-Unis ont signé un nouvel accord pour renforcer leurs relations militaires", *Military Zone-Opex 360* (blog), October 15, 2021, available at: www.opex360.com.

A Volatile Regional Alliance System

The strategic partnership that Greece signed with the United Arab Emirates in November 2020, including a mutual defense agreement, was the first such arrangement for Athens outside the NATO framework. This departure from the NATO system symbolized a certain mistrust, leading Greece to seek assurances from elsewhere.⁴⁰ However, the increase in the number of specific security agreements links together systems of alliances whose overall coherence is not immediately obvious, and which above all appear to be very volatile.

The French-Greek agreement is in fact part of a web of implicit and explicit alliances, of varying scope and purpose, which are being extended in response to successive geopolitical ruptures in the Mediterranean, the Arab-Persian Gulf and Africa. The various consequences of the Arab Spring uprisings – democratic transitions, counter-revolutions, civil wars and interstate conflicts; the end of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the increased isolation of Iran; the signing of the Abraham Accords, which led to the gradual normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab monarchies; and the expansion of jihadism in Sub-Saharan Africa – are all structuring parameters to which regional actors are responding with specific and changing diplomatic proposals.

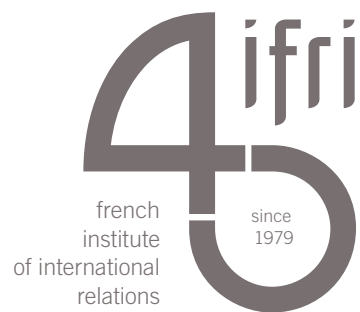
The struggles for influence in the region and attempts to organize relations around the energy issue demonstrate this tacit pursuit of security assurances: gas has become an indirect but very practical means of establishing ties in the Eastern Mediterranean that are motivated by political preferences. Thus, the defense of international maritime law, here invoked as a means to promote economic development, should in fact be taken literally: it is in reality sovereignty that is at stake, while business is secondary.⁴¹ As long as Ankara lays claim to the economic zones crossed by the EastMed gas pipeline project, the members of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum will find it difficult to make credible plans. This organization is thus more than an economic alliance; it is an informal front against Ankara, which is not a military one, but rather a way to strengthen ties with friendly Gulf countries and Egypt that have already been established with regard to other issues.

In an environment of volatility and ambivalent relations, amidst a continuing arms race, the foundations of security in the Eastern Mediterranean are fragile. The constant evolution of the ramifications of the various pacts can be a cause for legitimate concern, as it raises the

40. A. Marghelis, “La nouvelle stratégie régionale de la Grèce”, *Brief de la FMES*, April 6, 2021, available at: www.fmes-france.org.

41. This observation was made by S. Ülgen, director of the Turkish think tank EDAM, during the seminar “La relation franco-hellénique: un nouveau partenariat stratégique?”, organized by Ifri on January 13, 2021.

problem of the hierarchy of the alliances that have been formed. However, the very fragmentation of the landscape makes large-scale confrontations less likely: although the competing powers, who are not yet enemies, are constantly testing each other by raising the diplomatic stakes, they have so far also done everything possible to avoid taking a step too far toward military escalation. Accordingly, Paris argues that the mutual defense clause of the French-Greek agreement is not applicable to disagreements concerning the demarcation of exclusive economic zones, which is the main point of contention between Athens and Ankara; Greece itself continues to keep in reserve certain *casus belli* in relation to these legal disputes, but it is engaged in bilateral negotiations with Turkey precisely in order to resolve them. A successful outcome to these negotiations would finally loosen the Turkish stranglehold that has constrained Greek diplomacy for so long.



27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – France

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