

A Question of Engagement: Geopolitics and the American Factor in Greek Foreign Policy

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Washington, D.C. Government Relations & Strategic Communications, Specializing In
Congressional Affairs

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John Sifilides is a Washington, D.C. government relations and strategic communications, specializing in Congressional affairs. Under a U.S. government contract, Sifilides manages the State Department's professional development program for senior U.S. diplomats in Greece and Cyprus, in conjunction with the Turkey program. Twice recognized by the State Department for expertise in public policy and international relations, Sifilides speaks on American politics and geopolitical risk at investor and business conferences, and before government, military and intelligence community audiences. He has testified before Congress and is interviewed on American politics and global affairs by broadcast, print and new media. From 2005-2010, Sifilides served as Board Chairman of the Woodrow Wilson Center Southeast Europe Project, following seven years as Executive Director of the Western Policy Center, an international relations institute he launched in 1997 to research and forecast U.S. political, commercial and security issues in southeastern Europe. He directed the center's strategic planning, policy analysis, political and corporate communications, and financial management until he negotiated its 2004 merger with the Woodrow Wilson Center. Previously, he served as federal affairs strategist to a major California land development corporation, and as communications and legislative aide to Senator Alfonse D'Amato (R-NY), including on successful re-election campaigns in 1986 and 1992. Sifilides serves on the Board of Directors of International Orthodox Christian Charities, a global humanitarian organization, and of Leadership 100, a national Greek Orthodox foundation. Sifilides holds a Masters Degree in International Affairs from Columbia University and a Bachelors Degree in Political Science from Queens College.

Summary:

Since the 2009 revelations of its catastrophic public debts, Greece has withstood a government affairs and public relations battering in Washington unprecedented in the sixty-odd years during which the United States and Greece have been allies, close partners and stalwarts in defense of freedom in one of the most troubled regions of the world. Despite significant Greek interest in Washington's decisions about regional foreign policy and national security in the post-World War two period, Greek officials have historically been – and remain today – largely unaware of the sheer complexity, depth and breadth of the nature of Washington decision-making and the need to fully engage it if Greek security interests are to be effectively advanced. The difficult truth is that Washington views Greece not so much as a country referenced by many affluent, successful and politically influential Greek Americans but largely within the parameters of its broader geopolitical region. In Greece's case, the relationship is not exclusively bilateral but also involves U.S. interests in neighboring countries such as Turkey and those in the Balkan, Black Sea, northern African and Middle Eastern regions. The relationship is also predicated on the many functional issues of concern to the U.S. in the eastern Mediterranean, the larger southeastern European region, and global

issues than traverse Greece's borders and periphery. Until Greek strategy is crafted within the framework of the country's long-term interests to protect the nation, defend its borders, and project a degree of influence and power deep into its region and throughout its periphery, Greece's geopolitical ranking among the American foreign policy leadership will remain weak at a time when events in the region, marked by crises in Ukraine, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt, and by a resurgent al-Qaeda, Libyan chaos and Turkish drift, influence the course of Greece's security and stability. The degree to which Greece can influence the course of these events hinges on more effective engagement of Washington's decision-making networks, a process that does not necessarily involve scarce government funds.

Key Words:

Greek lobby, Greek strategic interests, Turkey, Cyprus, US, Russia, China

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The two Americans sitting amid the splendor of the Greek Foreign Ministry's seventh floor dining room, the majestic expanse of the Acropolis stunning the eyes through the sunlit windows, weren't sure how best to respond the Deputy Foreign Minister's question, "How can we in Greece help you in the United States do a better job of communicating our positions in Washington?"

The Americans took turns responding, in nearly-synchronized consecutive sentences. "Imagine there was not a single American of Greek extraction living in the United States," they said between exquisite bites of a sumptuous luncheon meal. "Imagine there are no Greek Americans to help advance your country's position in Washington. What would you do then?"

The minister, puzzled, responded, "We would need to talk to an array of government relations specialists and see how best they could help us advance our positions and achieve our objectives." "Exactly!" said the Americans. "And what precisely is your country's strategy for achieving its objectives in Washington?"

The minister looked around at the seven or so staff members, all diligently taking notes of the conversation between the minister and his two guests. They looked up from their notes, back at the minister and then to each other, all silent. The minister looked warmly at his guests and stated that his team would be reviewing the question and would want to continue the conversation in the very near future. Unfortunately, there was no follow-up, not in Athens nor in Washington in the weeks, months and years afterward.

It is not clear whether much has changed in Athens in the decade or so since this exchange took place, even after Greece has withstood a government affairs and public relations battering in Washington unprecedented in the sixty-odd years during which the United States and Greece have been allies, close partners and stalwarts in defense of freedom in one of the most troubled regions of the world.

While thousands of Greek Americans have worked, especially since the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus, to help Greece and Cyprus communicate their foreign policy concerns among Washington's international affairs and national security networks, Greek officials remain largely unaware of the sheer complexity, depth and breadth of the nature of Washington decision-making and the utter need to fully engage it at every level.

Washington views Greece, as it does nearly every country except those that span continents, oceans and multiple time zones, largely within the parameter of its broader geopolitical region. In Greece's case, the relationship necessarily involves U.S. interests in neighboring countries such as Turkey and those in the Balkan, Black Sea, northern African and Middle Eastern regions. The relationship is also predicated on the many functional issues of concern to the U.S. in the eastern Mediterranean, the larger southeastern European region, and those global issues that traverse Greece's borders and periphery.

This can be frustrating for a Greek foreign policy establishment that has historically centered its attention on the multiple dimensions of the Turkish threat perception, whether in the Aegean Sea, in Cyprus, or now in the eastern Mediterranean area where Greek and Turkish assertions of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) overlap. It has also looked to its north mostly through the prism of relations with the "Republic of Macedonia", called former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) until such time as a mutually agreed name and legal framework can be agreed to.

In recent years, Greece has stepped up its engagement on issues of religious freedom for the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey, and in the wake of close relations with Israel, on more muscular declarations of energy exploitation rights and strategic defense cooperation in the Mediterranean Sea.

Many of these issues involving Turkey have been front and center of Greece's U.S. agenda since the 1974 invasion of Cyprus, and especially after 1996 Imia/Kardak crisis that nearly spun the NATO allies into a naval conflict. But the manner in which these issues have been raised in Washington has too often been ineffective, largely due to an inability of Greek representatives to speak the policy language and tell the geopolitical story that American officials and influencers instinctively understand.

First, much as American national security focuses primarily on the continental United States, Greece has a strategic core that is the Aegean Sea, which connects the Athens-Piraeus metropolitan region to Thessaly, Greek Macedonia and the multitude of islands for trade, defense, flight information region, and communication lines.

Greek sovereignty in the Aegean Sea also provides it control over strategic sea lanes connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, affecting global trade and commerce, oil and gas shipping, and NATO and European security in the region.

The over-arching interest of Greece in the absolute integrity of its sovereign rights in the Aegean Sea is often blurred in its external communications, an error of colossal risk when policy options such as the geographically equitable division of the seabed are put forth by well-intentioned diplomats in Washington and Brussels.

This perspective directly confronts the Turkish view that the Aegean is a common sea between the two countries; that Turkey enjoys the rights of free navigation in international airspace and waters that comprise the majority of the Aegean region; and that Greece's unilateral extension of

territorial waters in the Aegean – however justified legally under the Convention of the Law of the Sea – may be repelled by Turkish military power.

The Turkish dimension to Greek foreign policy looms over Cyprus, with which Greece regularly espouses its political and moral solidarity, especially in NATO, European Union, United Nations and other international or multilateral organizations, while protesting four decades of outsized Turkish military forces in northern Cyprus.

Yet military planners in Washington and other NATO capitals know well that Greece does not possess the military capability to prevent a Turkish military operation in or around Cyprus. The distance from Rhodes, where Greece's easternmost military facility is located, to Cyprus far exceeds that of Greek islands, or even its mainland, to Turkey's Aegean coast.

In the current financial situation facing Greece, the expenditure of billions of Euros to build a Greek naval and air capabilities to smash past Turkish defenses west of Cyprus in the event of a military conflict there is unrealistic. Even if Greece could defend Cyprus, it would first be confronted by Turkish naval and air forces in the Mediterranean region east of Rhodes, and also face the risk of having to defend Greek islands mere kilometers from Turkey's Aegean coast.

Turkey's Fourth Army, also known as the "Army of the Aegean," is based in Izmir, covers the entire western region of Turkey, and possesses a powerful offensive amphibious capability aimed right at many of Greece's most populated Aegean islands. The Greece-Cyprus Joint Defense Doctrine declared in 1994 is viewed to this day largely as a political act, without the ability of either Athens or Nicosia to seriously implement or maintain it.

Beyond the "Eastern Question" of Turkey's intentions, a 360-degree overview of Greece's region is useful, given that along its borders and throughout its periphery, Greece faces myriad challenges at different threat levels. In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, an ultra-nationalist Slav government continues to disregard European and American entreaties to pursue a more conciliatory policy towards Greece, especially on cultural and historical matters that have contaminated their bilateral relationship.

The once-restive ethnic Albanian population is increasingly frustrated with the government's unwillingness to seriously pursue a trans-Atlantic agenda, instead gambling that provocations against Greece will bolster the ruling party's popularity in perpetuity. Greece must remain vigilant that the Ohrid agreement that prevented widespread social unrest more than a decade ago is upheld, with the greater burden falling on the Skopje government to respect the rights and the aspirations of its Albanian minority. Civil strife there could trigger a massive refugee crisis spilling over the border into Greek Macedonia and destabilizing Greece's northern borders with Albania and Bulgaria.

Greece already faces serious issues with Bulgaria focused largely on its corrosive criminal enterprises and the attendant corruption that infects trade and customs enforcement between the two countries.

Greece's relationship with Albania is much improved since the post-Hoxha upheaval of the 1990s, and the Athens-Tirana agreement on the delineation of their respective EEZs opens new opportunities for Greece to begin exploiting possible fossil fuel reserves south of the Ionian islands.

In Italy, one of Greece's primary EU partners, Greece is focused on expanding trade and energy ties, especially as the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline connecting Turkey, Greece, Albania and Italy is transformed into a major new regional energy link.

Greece remains necessarily concerned about the lawlessness that dominates in Libya, directly south of Crete, including the large southern desert areas where Al-Qaeda has established a strong presence. Their attacks against targets across North Africa not only destabilize already fragile governments in the wake of the Arab upheavals, but also generate regular waves of migration affecting Greece and other southern EU countries.

Similarly, Greece must recalibrate its long-standing interests in Egypt, one of its most important trading partners, as that nation undergoes cycles of secular and Islamist tyranny. The Sinai peninsula has been especially vulnerable to radical violence, even as the Egyptian military conducts major operations in the border region near Israel, Greece's newest and most significant Mediterranean ally after Cyprus.

Israel has become the focus of diversified Greek engagement, including energy, defense cooperation (including the security of offshore natural gas platforms), trade, and technology training. Athens has weaved all these Israeli ties into a new U.S. political campaign, and Israel's highly effective supporters in Washington are revisiting Greece's potential as a critical EU link that can weaken international efforts to diplomatically isolate Israel, including the poisonous Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Beyond its immediate region, Greece's relations with Russia, its historic religious and cultural supporter, will be tested by increasingly fractious ties between Moscow and Brussels, where EU foreign policy to which Greece largely adheres may push back more strongly against Russian policies in Ukraine, as well as in Georgia, Armenia and Moldova.

China has become one of Greece's most vital commercial partners, with dialogue involving trade, investment, shipping and rail transportation, including plans to transform Piraeus into an Aegean container shipping port to rival Rotterdam and Hamburg, with an extensive rail network extending to major central and eastern European markets, as well as to Black Sea economic centers.

Washington is very closely eyeing Greece's relations with both superpowers, given that Russia retains a strategic interest in a Mediterranean presence dating back to its support for Bulgarian, Yugoslav and Slav-Macedonian Communist designs on northern Greece during and after the Second World War. Russia's inordinate financial influence in Cyprus' economy, and the military support it has provided to Nicosia to push back Turkey's military efforts to intimidate natural gas operations in Cypriot waters, only underscore Washington's concerns about Moscow's ultimate objectives in a region secured by the U.S. and NATO for the last half century.

The Russian annexation of Crimea and ongoing push to dominate Ukraine demonstrates the seriousness with which Moscow will secure not only its natural gas supply grid to European Union markets, but also its warm-water access through the Aegean Sea to the Mediterranean basin and beyond.

China's lease on the Piraeus port is viewed favorably in Washington as among the most significant investments in Greece, despite a half decade of efforts to secure meaningful foreign direct investment into an economy still marred by corruption, non-competitiveness and general labor rigidity. However, the price to Greece of the \$5 billion lease was a 35-year commitment, far beyond the horizon but very much in line with Chinese strategic investments worldwide.

One major concern about such Chinese investments generally, beyond Greece, is Beijing's ability to mute criticism from recipient countries of its military build-up, aggressive diplomacy (imagine how Greeks would honestly view China's claims on the South China Sea as comparable to Turkish claims on the Aegean Sea), and broad indifference to human rights – especially where it has invested heavily to secure natural resources that fuel its massive export economy.

Greece's primary regional and continental foreign policy considerations round out with emphasis on Germany, the dominant EU power that also dictates the terms of the "Troika" package on the Greek government and economy, as well on France, seen as Greece's most reliable diplomatic supporter within the EU.

In Washington, however, the effective management of relations with Greece at official levels masks the many and historic flaws of Athens' strategy – or lack thereof – towards the world's most influential country.

Prime Minister Antonis Samaras met with President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden within the space of two months in 2013, and bilateral visits including Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker to Athens and Greece's foreign and defense ministers to Washington continue to normalize the relationship between the two NATO allies.

But interviews with several leading supporters of U.S.-Greece relations in Washington reveal fissures that have yet to be addressed.

Nick Larigakis, President of the American Hellenic Institute, has underscored in many public comments that the Greek immigrant community of the 20th century has largely passed, and that the second generation of Americans of Greek heritage "simply do not identify with the home country the way past generations did," Larigakis said.

He expressed his concern that Greece needs to do a better job of "highlighting the geostrategic importance of Greece and the role it plays in supports of U.S. interests in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Specifically through NATO and the many military facilities that exist in Greece, none more important in all of the Mediterranean than the naval support activity in Souda Bay, in western Crete. It is unbelievable how little members of Congress and their staffers know about many of these issues and capabilities."

Beyond Washington, Larigakis underscored the importance of “more high-level visits from all facets of the Greek government and private sector, to foster an atmosphere of stronger mutual cooperation and understanding – not necessarily or exclusively focused on political and geostrategic topics but also on Greece’s energy planning and shipping achievements, to cite just two examples.”

Larigakis’ concerns about the importance of strong Congressional interest and awareness were shared by Mike Manatos, Executive Director of the Coordinated Effort of Hellenes and Senior Vice President of the public policy firm of Manatos & Manatos, founded by his father Andrew Manatos and grandfather Mike Manatos.

“Each day the U.S. government is struggling to handle many dire conflicts around the world that are more urgent and deadly than current developments in Greece and Cyprus,” Manatos said. “To get the White House, State Department and other key agencies to focus on Greece or on Cyprus at the top levels in such an atmosphere often requires pressure from key Senators and members of Congress.”

Manatos added a vital insight into the foreign policy communications strategies of other governments to their Washington counterparts. “When the most effective foreign government officials meet with U.S. officials, they begin by explaining a number of ways in which their country has recently come through for Washington. Only then do they convey the request for support on their priorities.

“Unfortunately, supporting the U.S. over the years was politically difficult in Greece and Cyprus, and Greek and Cypriot officials had less to deliver when meeting with U.S. officials. Too often in Washington, Greek officials – as well as community members – are perceived as just asking for help, whether on Cyprus, the Macedonia name issue, or relations with Turkey.”

Another critical arena for Greek policy engagement in Washington stressed by both Basil Mossaides, Executive Director of the deep-rooted Washington-based AHEPA and by Endy Zemenides, Executive Director of the upstart Chicago-based Hellenic American Leadership Council, is the “ideas industry” of more than one hundred foreign policy think tanks, policy institutes and research centers in Washington.

“Greece should take measures to focus on prominent think-tanks that generate policy papers, op-eds and commentaries, and reports that wind up in the mainstream media or in the hands of the bureaucrats at the State Department,” said Mossaides.

Recognizing that Greek government resources are limited, he added that “Greece needs to demonstrate and convey repeatedly how it contributes to U.S. security policy in the eastern Mediterranean. The information disseminated in Washington about the important role of Greece is simply not enough.”

Zemenides also supports the creation of “a program through which U.S. decision-makers and opinion leaders, such as journalists, think tank fellows, and corporate and civic leaders, are taken

to Greece. Greece should also promote the establishment or funding of programs at major think tanks that in effect will make Greece part of the mainstream conversation" among Washington's leading influencers and policy planners.

"The Greek state keeps going to the same few wells over and over again," said Zemenides, especially among the handful of Greek American Members of Congress and an equally small number of reliably supportive lawmakers who are not of Greek extraction. "Despite the limited number of people consistently involved over the years, too many ups and downs in terms of resources provided, and the Greek emphasis on tactics over strategy, Greek American lobbying efforts have occasionally been able to achieve astounding successes."

Zemenides called on Athens to craft a strategy which can be implemented by supporters in the U.S., be they activists or lobbyists, "as the lack of clarity and decisiveness from Athens leads to muddled messaging and to groups sometimes adopting lines that clash with Greek government policies."

So what then is to be done? Ideally, Greece would be able to secure the professional services of a Washington public policy firm to leverage Greece with Executive Branch officials, especially in the White House National Security Council, as well as the departments of State and Defense and the intelligence agencies, and with Congressional leaders, with a focus on foreign affairs and armed services committee members.

A superior firm should be able to provide the Greek government, through its Embassy in Washington, with the real-time foreign policy knowledge of what political agendas are being discussed and debated. This was clearly absent when Greece was blind-sided by Secretary of State Colin Powell's November 2004 decision to grant full diplomatic recognition to FYROM as the Republic of Macedonia.

To a considerable degree, U.S. policy in Greece is now focused, as Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland stated during her February 2014 Athens meeting with Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, "first and foremost on our bilateral relationship...supporting Greece through this reform effort and supporting the dual agenda of implementing reform and stimulating growth."

But on a strategic level, Greece absolutely needs to reposition itself in Washington. An effective government relations and public policy campaign, beyond the meager resources allocated to an increasingly stressed embassy network, would raise awareness and visibility of Greece's strong regional and global partnership with the United States as well as its determination to structurally reform its economy. Taken together, these twin objectives could more reliably generate favorable policy decisions towards Greece from the Obama Administration and from Congress.

Specifically, this would require strengthening and leveraging existing relationships in Washington; exploring and developing new partnerships opportunities; and educating the Senate and House leadership, beyond the Greek American Members of Congress and those in the Congressional Hellenic Caucus, about the true value of Greece in the U.S. international arena, to establish for Greece the prominence it should command with policymakers and opinion leaders.

Political communications in Washington require a dedicated, consistent and ongoing campaign, with hired manpower to implement a multi-faceted effort that builds relationships and recognition in Washington. This would include arranging ongoing Congressional and other influential delegation trips to for think tank analysts, media and Washington power brokers to Greece.

For instance, U.S. foundation trips to Souda Bay on Crete, with naval and air facilities that offer an exceptional base for military operations in all directions throughout the eastern Mediterranean basin, as well as for control of the sea and air lines of communication connecting southeastern Europe to northern Africa, the Middle East and the strategic chokepoint of the Suez Canal, could be immensely valuable for Greece.

The U.S.-Asia Foundation is a not-for-profit organization that accepts large contributions from major corporations and organizes "cultural exchange" travel to China for dozens of Members of Congress and hundreds of their leading Congressional staff advisors – 50 staffers in 2013 alone. By bringing successive waves of influential lawmakers and staffers to China over several decades, the foundation has helped shape the worldview of a generation of Congressional policymakers. This formula could work very well for Greece in the context of offering first-hand perspectives on area trends and developments throughout southeastern Europe, showcasing Greece as a leading U.S. partner in the region.

Washington think tanks that specialize in foreign affairs are an important component of a well-conceived strategy. Major institutions such as the Atlantic Council, the Brookings Institution, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (with which the Western Policy Center, which I directed for seven years of policy analysis innovation, merged in 2004 to establish the Southeast Europe Project), the Council on Foreign Relations, the Hudson Institute, the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation house many of Washington's most astute and influential thinkers on matters of international policy and national security.

The degree to which Greece can create positive, compelling and accurate messaging – especially given the urgency of the financial crisis – is key to persuading influential leaders in Washington that Greece is a valuable NATO ally, EU member and global partner with a powerful, influential and concerned political constituency in states beyond New York, California, Illinois, Florida and Massachusetts. Greece also needs to inform policy planners and lawmakers that it is a true ally in the global battles against Islamist terrorism, piracy, nuclear proliferation and human trafficking.

Greece should also educate, with state-of-the-art mapping and digital communications, that it is located in a strategic geopolitical location critical to U.S. regional energy and global maritime security interests in the Black Sea, Balkans and Middle Eastern regions. Many of Washington's most influential decision-makers are astonished to learn that Greece is situated just 200 miles north of Tripoli and 500 miles northwest of Cairo.

This is simply the way of Washington. For the first half of 2014, governments and major foreign institutions have hired professional service firms to achieve a wide range of policy objectives:

- The Dominican Republic to discuss immigration matters and promote further economic development and cooperation with the U.S. government via letters, emails, and meetings;
- Iraq's "Al Arabiya Bloc" to represent the interests of its constituents in the democratic process of Iraq through May 2014 through "in-person meetings across the U.S. legislative and executive branches of government, print, radio & television press pieces, international academic/NGO engagement, public engagement and social media platforms;"
- the Embassy of Japan to work on controversial textbook wording in Virginia educational materials;
- the American University of Nigeria to edit and write news releases, op-eds and letters to the editor and disseminate them to news outlets to promote university fundraising.

Even the impoverished Republic of Haiti has hired a firm to deliver essential services in Washington.

Given the financial constraints required by the Troika in exchange for more than 240 billion Euros in assistance, the Greek government cannot fund a professional political communications program in the U.S. However, creative alternatives are available.

For instance, a consortium of Greek corporate magnates and entrepreneurs from among its wealthiest families can endow a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) foundation in the U.S., whose funding would be matched by prominent Greek American business executives and philanthropists.

Private resources combined with government policy coordination would greatly facilitate a political communications campaign based upon reconsidered Greek strategy and American professional tactics. Washington's government relations executives, along with established civic leaders in the Greek American community, are both equipped with deep knowledge of Greece's institutional supporters in the Congress, the think tanks and policy institutes, and in print, broadcast and digital media.

In addition, as the dozens of countries – allies and adversaries of the U.S. alike – who hire them know very well, lobbyists and public relations specialists bring their seasoned experience, high-value relationships, and awareness of the policy influence business in Washington, navigating the centers where decisions are made, refined, revisited and approved for official implementation.

Properly structured, a Greek political communications strategy in the U.S. could re-position the country into a more highly favorable posture within two to three years. But American tactics could only be implemented upon a foundation of determined and clear Greek "stratigiki" – a Greek word rooted in the legendary military undertakings of Leonidas in Thermopylae, Themistocles in Salamis, and Pausanias in Plataea.

Yet if Greek strategy is truly lacking today, it must be re-forged in the framework of an objective and dispassionate assessment of Greece's long-term interests to protect the nation, defend its borders, and project a degree of influence and power deep into its region and throughout its periphery.

Otherwise, Greece's geopolitical ranking among the American foreign policy leadership will remain weak and unattended at a time when the often-ruthless region in which Greece is situated, marked by crises in Ukraine, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt, and by a resurgent al-Qaeda, Libyan chaos and Turkish drift, pushes aside the concerns of a nation that barely competes in the intensive marketplace of ideas, influence and power that is – and will remain in – Washington.