

A new chapter in Greek-African relations or a flash in the pan?

When Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias heralded a new chapter in relations between Africa and Greece to a gathered host of African ambassadors for Africa Day to mark the establishment of the African Union late last month, it hardly made waves. Statements of good intention towards the oft-neglected continent are nothing new. But a flurry of recent diplomatic activity, including a new diplomatic mission in Dakar, Senegal and the announcement that Greece will contribute to the French-led peacekeeping mission in the Sahel, would suggest that Dendias's assertion might this time actually be backed by action

by George Philipas



Nikos Dendias, participates in the digital event celebrating Africa Day, hosted by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the African Group of Ambassadors in Athens. Source: @GreeceMFA

Greece's relationship with Africa has for long been almost non-existent, primarily focused on some rudimentary contacts with the Greek diaspora in the various centers around the continent. It is from this low level that the recent bout of activity can be viewed as something new. "It's unprecedented," said Dr. Ioannis

Grigoriadis, senior research fellow and head of the Turkey program at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy in Athens (ELIAMEP), an independent think-tank. "I think we're in a pivotal point in the sense that Greece is recovering from a very severe economic and political crisis, and close to grasping new opportunities."



Ioannis Grigoriadis, senior research fellow and head of the Turkey program at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy in Athens (ELIAMEP)

Indeed, economic opportunity featured prominently in Dendias's speech to African ambassadors when he mentioned the recently signed African Continental Free Trade Area agreement (ACFTA) and the potential to open up a market of 1.2 billion people. The chance to become a hub for goods to and from Africa is certainly there. "Greece can play a much stronger role in the supply chains and transport of goods between Africa and Greece. So much of it is happening through Italy

now, but I think there is the case for example for Thessaloniki, Alexandroupoli or Piraeus to become entry points for African goods to reach the Balkans or Eastern European markets," noted Dr. Grigoriadis.

And it is not only investment opportunities in Africa. There is also the potential of investment flowing the other way, as Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, Head of International Relations at Wits University in Johannesburg claimed. "The Greek economy has been ravaged by 10 years of austerity. It's not just about Greek investment into Africa. We know there are a number of African multinationals that themselves are investing in Europe."



Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, Head of International Relations at Wits University in Johannesburg

The Tabuka Task Force

But Greece's interest is certainly not just driven by commercial considerations. The decision to beef up the Takuba Task Force, as the European peacekeeping mission in Mali and spearheaded by the French is known, has been heralded as another sign of a more dynamic foreign policy. Recently retired Lieutenant General Ilias Leontaris, former emeritus commander of the 1st Hellenic Army and ex-Chief of the Cypriot National Guard, confirmed that while the details, such as total numbers or the timescale, had not yet been set in stone, the mission has been cleared by the military and awaits approval at the ministerial level at the Council of National Security. "It's a matter of showing the flag. It's a matter of showing that we are concerned about security," he proudly stated.



Ilias Leontaris, former emeritus commander of the 1st Hellenic Army and ex-Chief of the Cypriot National Guard

As a non-colonial power Greece is seen as adding legitimacy to the struggle against Islamic insurgency in the region. "I think that Greece has a lot to offer to European peacekeeping infrastructures," added Dr. Grigoriadis, "because the military capacity is there, it can play a role which is even disproportionate to the GDP per capita of the country. But that requires some political will."

Time for diplomacy

Opening the diplomatic mission in Dakar was certainly a positive step in this direction. "If this is a political decision, then you also need political officers. Having a military there on its own is not going to cut the mustard," cautioned Sidiropoulos. "So having the embassy in Dakar is important. It's an important regional hub."

Overshadowing the push into Africa, some see more urgent motives tied to the wake-up call that was the security and maritime accord between Libya



The EU Council has decided to extend the mandate of EU civilian mission EU CAP Sahel Mali until 31 January 2023

and Turkey that undercut its claims in the region and spurred Greece into a more active diplomatic role in the first place. Turkey's decade-long push has seen it become an important player in terms of commerce, trade and humanitarian aid in Africa. The number of its diplomatic missions shot up from 12 in 2009 to 42 at present. Sidiropoulos laid out the implications. "One of the things Turkey might do is to rally support on international platforms around issues such as Cyprus, or the issues of law of the seas and demarcation of maritime zones and so on. I mean, Africa has 55 votes in many of these international forums."

But while countering Turkey is important, the consensus is that it's certainly not the main reason for Greece's foray on the continent. As Dr. Grigoriadis stated, "for this Greek pivot to Africa to be sustainable, it has to be beyond Greek-Turkish confrontation and conflict because it is something that's worth it in itself."

What is clear though is that if it is to realise its lofty goals in Africa it cannot match Turkey simply by its presence there. "It's not about having 40 embassies in Africa, but about having embassies in important countries," reflected Sidiropoulos, "and making sure that those embassies are properly resourced quite frankly".

Africa has long been seen as the diplomatic graveyard by Greek ambassadors and a place to see out the sunset years of an illustrious career. Grigoriadis pointed out that ambassadorial positions are ranked in terms of favorability at the Greek Foreign Ministry and almost all African ones were ranked as among the least desirable. That mentality will have to change if Greece is to even begin to transform its relationship with the continent.

While reawakening diplomatic interest in Africa marks a new point for Greece in its push to develop an independent foreign policy, long-neglected and always in deference to EU, there remains a big mountain to climb. Maybe one that is insurmountable. "In Greece we like to say it is never too late," Lt Gen Leontaris pondered. "But in some cases, late is late."

