



The Greek-Indian relations in context

from the perspective of

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Director General, ELIAMEP

**Greece and India:
An alliance of goals**

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Moving into a strategic orbit**



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Cover Photo: Diplomatic protocol display of the Greek and the Indian flag in Athens on the occasion of the official visit by the Indian PM Narendra Modi to Greece in August 25, 2023. Credit: MAKES SENSE ©

The Greek-Indian relations in context:

A strategic relationship or a flash in the pan?

The question

Last week the Indian Prime Minister travelled to Greece; his visit was heralded as a historic milestone of goodwill and cooperation, a compass for the future. Over the long centuries of their historic association, Greece and India have always been aware of each other, but have never managed to create a strong and enduring cooperation on the basis of common goals and aspirations. We have invited two experts, one from each side, to put things into perspective and look ahead into the future.

In doing so, we are launching a new series of “Perspectives / Επόψεις”, in which we will pose the same question and invite researchers and experts, both from within and outside ELIAMEP, to deliberate on it from their different viewpoints. In this first edition, it is only appropriate that the ELIAMEP should be represented by Professor Maria Gavouneli, its Director General. We have another first on the Indian side, as Ambassador Anil Trigunayat offers us his exceptional experience and insight, but also the first instalment in the long-awaited association between ELIAMEP and the Vivekananda International Foundation, India’s leading think-tank.

*From the perspective of
Professor Maria GAVOUNELI*

Greece and India: An alliance of goals

The image was both impressive and incongruous: tens of mostly young people sitting on the dusty ground in a rural setting watching on an old TV set, hastily mounted on the wall, a high-tech vehicle landing on the lunar surface while on a little window on the screen Prime Minister Modi follows the proceedings rather bemused, sitting afar in the BRICS meeting in South Africa with a small Indian flag at hand. All the contradictions of the great country that is India in one flickering electronic picture.

Earlier this year, India superseded China as the largest population on earth reaching 1,43 billion people or 17,76% of the world – with the added advantage of being the most populous democracy in the planet. She is currently the 5th largest economy in the world, bypassing the UK, the erstwhile colonial power, and set to be the third by the year 2030. India is currently chairing the G20 and plays a leading role among the BRICS – the group originally created in 2006 by Brazil, Russia, India, China and later South Africa as an alternate power pole, very recently enlarged by Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates, Argentina and Egypt.

The contrast with Greece, an economy just very recently emerging from a catastrophic crisis with a declining aging population, tagged at a European promontory amid a sea of troubles, could not be more acute. And yet, far and away, distant and yet in crossing routes, India and Greece share quite a lot: from their shared ancient civilisations to their contemporary commercial, military and educational ties.

A commercial corridor

One of the many lessons taught by the pandemic was the precarious nature of a perennially rolling corridor, transporting merchandise from East to West, thus eliminating the need for storage. It was the shipping industry, that never stopped working during that difficult period and secured the provisioning of our societies with medical equipment and victuals. That conclusion has certainly made an impression to the Indian government as well. The theme of India's G20 Presidency: Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam | One Earth – One Family – One Future may

well be drawn from the ancient Sanskrit text of the Maha Upanishad but it clearly reflects contemporary concerns related to the preservation of a sustainable environment, the challenges of climate change, the underlying commonality of the human fate. If, along the way, it may help to generate a new commercial corridor, contrary or complementary to the Chinese concept of One Belt One Road, so much the better.

It is an ambitious goal, which elevates the Greek-Indian relationship into a 'Strategic Partnership', the third India has engaged in next to those with France and Germany, [...] thus transforming the commercial transactional trade into a wider cooperation across the board.

Under these conditions, the geographical position of the port of Piraeus acquires an obvious added value, both as a Greek entry port but also as the gateway to the European market. And that realisation stands as the basis and the reason behind the avowed goal of the parties in their Athens meeting to double the volume of the bilateral commerce by 2030, starting from the USD 2 billion worth of value during the period 2022-2023. It is in fact an ambitious goal, which elevates the Greek-Indian relationship into a 'Strategic Partnership', the third India has engaged in next to those with France and Germany. In the words of Prime Minister Modi:

“We have decided to boost cooperation in areas of defence and security, infrastructure, education, new and emerging technologies and agriculture”,

thus transforming the commercial transactional trade into a wider cooperation across the board. This is not coming out of the blue. Political consultations between Greece and India have been going on for quite some time, with the 13th round being held in June 2023 at the level of the Secretaries General of the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs. Already in 2022, a Protocol on trade, energy, tourism and maritime cooperation was signed in Athens during the 8th session of the Greece-India Joint Economic Committee.

Such a dramatic increase in trade volume and the underlying strengthening of institutional arrangements would also serve as a test drive for a wider and much more encompassing Free Trade Agreement between India and the European Union, of which -we often forget- Greece is one of the members of longest standing. It is to be reminded that, after a cooling period, on 17 June 2022 negotiations were relaunched between the parties with a view to achieving a wide-ranging Free Trade Agreement, which would eventually be complemented by separate agreements on investment protection and on geographical indications. If and when brought

to fruition, these agreements would significantly improve the ties between two huge markets: currently, the EU is India's third largest trading partner, amounting to more than 10.8% of the total Indian trade whereas India is at the tenth position of the European list with just 2,1% of the total EU trade.

Already, Indian companies have made their presence felt in Greece in some of the areas targeted by the recent agreements. Construction and pharmaceutical companies are already active in each other's markets. Science and technology projects, including the high-tech element of the Indian industry, would be welcomed as investors in Greece; they fall in with the overall policy of attracting high-value services ideal for the well-educated and trained segment of the Greek workforce. Trade in agricultural products is also increasing with significant investment made by Greek companies in India and the import/export volume significantly and steadily climbing. To that effect, the parties also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the field of agriculture, including the establishment of a Hellenic-Indian Joint Sub-committee on Agriculture for facilitating sectoral cooperation for mutual benefit.

Agreements that would allow workers to be made available upon request in an organized and well-regulated manner would also act as an acceptable alternative to the large number of migrants, who find their way to Europe in illegal crossings, often with tragic results.

An important additional element in that respect relates to the facilitation of lawful migration, in the form of either seasonal agricultural workers or temporary construction and industrial workers. Greece, as almost all western economies, is challenged by a severe lack of working hands, which may well impede its long-term economic development. Agreements that would allow workers to be made available upon request in an organized and well-regulated manner would also act as an acceptable alternative to the large number of migrants, who find their way to Europe in illegal crossings, often with tragic results as the recent overburdened and capsized boat off the coast of Pylos has demonstrated – whereas their transitional time-limited nature may well make the whole idea of migration more palatable to a European political body, who is ready to lapse into hate speech with racist overtones and extreme political choices. The eventual success or failure of such schemes would be perceived as test runs for the wider discussion on the European Asylum and Migration Pact, which after almost seven years of negotiations remains elusive.

Similar lessons drawn from experience may also be available in other areas, in parallel to mutual benefit considerations. One such area is energy. Mainly as a result of the war in Ukraine, Greece has become an energy transit hub, with a reverse flow towards the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the Ukraine as opposed to the more traditional north-south trajectory. Its avowed goal, nowadays, is to become a major energy producer, banking on the geographical benefit of abundant sun and wind. On the other hand, India was instrumental in creating, jointly with France, the International Solar Alliance, an attempt to bring together smaller and poorer States into efforts to combat the repercussions of climate change through the deployment of solar energy. Greece was only too happy to join another 100 of so States, lying in the sunshine zone between the tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. The action is certainly complementary to the energy-related initiatives and projects currently in various stages of development in the Eastern Mediterranean and offer an international platform to an essential Greek and (once again) European regional policy.

A strategic security alliance

If the commercial part of the bilateral relations serves as an experiment in identifying best practices suitable for the wider European market, questions of security serve as an important counterbalance to the rigours of the Mediterranean neighbourhood.

The extension of the regional onto the global is particularly important for the burgeoning security and military coordination. If the commercial part of the bilateral relations serves as an experiment in identifying best practices suitable for the wider European market, questions of security serve as an important counterbalance to the rigours of the Mediterranean neighbourhood.

This military parameter combines both bilateral and regional parameters. Indian frigates have paid visits to Souda Bay in Crete and trained with their Greek counterparts. Indian air force has already joined the Greek air force in exercises and have exchanged training visits with a view to establishing a more systematic and closer association. Both countries operate in often hostile neighbourhoods and it does seem that they would like to combine their experience and expertise and exchange best practices both in the military field and in the diplomatic arena.

This type of cooperation does not only serve as a liaison with the NATO military arrangements. They extend also to wider security concerns, promoting freedom of navigation in the oceans

in accordance with the Law of the Sea Convention. India is particularly interested in safeguarding Critical Maritime Routes in the Indo-Pacific, thus creating a maritime counterpart to the Chinese One Belt – One Road initiative, with obvious benefits for the Greek shipping industry as well. There is a CMR Indo-Pacific programme in full deployment for the period 2025-2024, to which the European Union (and consequently Greece) is committed and is directly linked to the EU Critical Maritime Route Wider Indian Ocean – CRIMARIO arrangements. Both projects tie in with the recently approved Critical Infrastructure Directive 2022/2557 on the resilience of critical entities, which came into force on 16 January 2023. The Directive applies to safe maritime infrastructure, such as ports, storage facilities, refuelling and cleaning services. Its remit expands into three priority areas: preparedness, response and international cooperation; and over 11 sectors: energy, transport, banking, financial market infrastructures, health, drinking water, wastewater, digital infrastructure, public administration, space, and food. Member-States are mandated to produce revised risk assessments and stress tests by 18 October 2024 and have a National Strategy adopted by 18 January 2026.

Precise deadlines aside, the commitment to an increased security effort is indisputable and may well extend to civilian areas as well. Related to climate change concerns but with a strong security element is another Indian initiative, which Greece has been invited to join. The Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) attempts to generate projects, that may sustain the vigour of repeated natural disasters, the scope and frequency of which are already increasing.

A cultural exchange of long standing

More mundane but arguably even more influential are the cultural exchanges between the two countries. Although well aware of each other at least since the time of Alexander the Great, the two countries have only started an organized academic cooperation, looking for joint courses and degrees for their respective universities and research institutions. The action is well timed to coincide with the current swell of extroverted activities launched by the Greek universities in an impressive number of English-speaking programmes.

The exchange of students is well complemented by increased numbers of tourists arriving in both countries, further enhanced by direct air links between Athens and Delhi. The familiarity with ideas, philosophies, occasionally even mentalities may well decimate the long distance, that has kept us apart for so many centuries.

*From the perspective of
Ambassador Anil TRIGUNAYAT*

India and Greece: Moving into a strategic orbit

It is easy for the civilizational consorts to revive the flame of partnership effortlessly and move it into a strategic orbit underlined by mutually beneficial markers. India and Greece are no exception. Both have enjoyed a civilizational connect over the centuries that has been imbibed and enriched at the popular level. A certain curiosity and bonhomie exist. One of the markers of a good robust relationship is the high-level exchanges. There has been no dearth of such exchanges from presidential to ministerial to institutionalized deliberations. Two Indian Presidents, Dr APJ Abul kalam and Ram Nath Kovind (2018), paid state visits to Athens. Greek leaders have visited India. Several important ministerial visits have taken place and the most recent one being that of External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar (2021), albeit after 18 years, but this was closely reciprocated by the Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias (March 2022). Meetings of the Joint economic Committee and foreign office consultations were held recently to iron out some of the MoUs/Agreements that might be signed during the visit. Very often these are precursors for the high-level visits.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official visit to Greece (August 25) en route from the BRICS Summit in South Africa is remarkable as it completes the critical circle even though he has met his Greek counterpart Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis a couple of times already. The visit is set to take the relationship to a much higher orbit of cooperation the in the strategic domain.

One of the key deficits has been the absence of an Indian Prime Ministerial visit during the last four decades, like that to many other countries – late PM Indira Gandhi visited in 1983. Therefore, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official visit to Greece (August 25) en route from the BRICS Summit in South Africa, is remarkable as it completes the critical circle even though

he has met his Greek counterpart Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis a couple of times already. The visit is set to take the relationship to a much higher orbit of cooperation in the strategic domain. In his departure statement PM Modi underscored that 'our ties have been strengthened by shared values of democracy, rule of law and pluralism and cooperation in diverse sectors such as trade and investment, defence and cultural people to people contacts have been bringing our two countries closer together'.

Athens stood by New Delhi during the trying times in 1998, when India faced sanctions from the western world. Not only had the Greek Defence Minister travelled to India and signed a MoU for Defence Cooperation, Greece also supported India on the Jammu & Kashmir issue while commiserating with it in countering terrorism and confronting perpetrators of cross-border terrorism. India also supports the Greek stance on Cyprus issue.

India and Greece enjoy a high level of political trust, encompassing strategic contours of the bilateral relationship. Both are sensitive and supportive to each other's core concerns. Athens stood by New Delhi during the trying times in 1998, when India faced sanctions from the western world. Not only had the Greek Defence Minister travelled to India and signed a MoU for Defence Cooperation, Greece also supported India on the Jammu & Kashmir issue while commiserating with it in countering terrorism and confronting perpetrators of cross-border terrorism. India also supports the Greek stance on Cyprus issue. Athens supports the Indian quest for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council and supported other candidatures. More importantly it also backed India's membership to critical export control regimes like the NSG, MTCR and the Wassenaar and Australia Groups, which is a testament to the convergence on critical issues. Space and shipping are sunrise sectors of cooperation for both countries.

As the global churn intensifies, both India and Greece are increasingly looking at the convergences in maritime security, defence and sustainable development. Greece is an acknowledged shipping giant and is also an EU and NATO member. Both are geo-strategically located and prefer to work for regional and global security. India historically used to be a maritime nation and is a resident power in the Indian ocean and Greece is pivotal in the Eastern Mediterranean and both have congruence of views on maintaining and ensuring free and open and secured sea lanes of communications (SLOC) for trade and transit. Hence, they can complete the arc from Indian Ocean to the eastern Mediterranean as part of the global

good and welfare. Both India and Greece have excellent strategic ties with major countries in West Asia, especially with the Gulf Cooperation Council, and in North Africa, like Egypt and Libya, which complement their strategic operating space for mutual benefit. PM Modi was recently (July 2023) in Cairo when the bilateral relationship was elevated to strategic partnership. Both also have a challenging relationship with Turkey, whose leader will also be participating at the G20 Summit next month. But some strategic messaging is a given. Elevation of the relations to a formal strategic partnership level could be a good start.

While unveiling Greece's new National Strategy for Extroversion Plan – 2021, Prime Minister Mitsotakis made a laudatory reference to India's growth and economic policy underscoring need for closer engagement. 'Make in India' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', the development initiatives, also are of great interest to Greek investors and India Participated as 'Honoured Country' in the 84th Thessaloniki International Fair (TIF), the largest annual commercial exposition of Greece, and also the largest in Southeast Europe and the Balkans from 7-15 September 2019. The high-powered Indian business delegation was led by then Minister of State for Commerce Hardeep Singh Puri. The "New India" Pavilion was inaugurated by the Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who made a public statement that invitation to India to participate as "Honoured Country" was not by chance, but it represented Greece's conscious policy decision to forge a robust economic, trade, and investment partnership with an economic power like India.

Proposals even to create a twinning partnership between Indian and Greek ports are being considered. Another major area of cooperation in the domain of energy security could be closer association with the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF). Even in the finance sector like with France, New Delhi might offer UPI for promoting trade and tourism.

Trade and economic potential at the moment is somewhat under-realized, even though an upswing is noticeable in the past couple of years. Currently trade is hovering around \$ 2bn. India is the 5th largest and fastest growing major economy in the world bypassing UK recently and is slated to be the 3rd largest by 2030, which will further enhance her global footprint. The Greek economy has come out of the woods and is doing very well, emerging as one of the fastest in the EU. No wonder several Indian companies are looking to explore infrastructure opportunities in Greece and the Greek magnates are eyeing Indian opportunity. Indian Multinational GMR and its JV partner has already won a €850 million construction project of

a new airport at Kasteli in Crete, becoming the first-ever entry of an Indian company in Greece in recent years. New opportunities for strategic purposes are also being flagged. Ports in the north and south are being developed as energy hubs and for regional trade and transportation links. It is an opportune time for us to strengthen our relations with Greece at this juncture for mutual benefit. Proposals even to create a twinning partnership between Indian and Greek ports are being considered. Another major area of cooperation in the domain of energy security could be closer association with the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF). Even in the finance sector like with France, New Delhi might offer UPI for promoting trade and tourism.

Defence cooperation has been reinforced and expanded since 1998 through high-level visits, participation in military exercises, National Defence College visits and exchanges. Only recently we had air and naval exercises. The Indian Chief of Army Staff (COAS) was expected to visit in recent times but he spoke virtually to follow up on key issues of mutual interest. Air Force Chiefs of both the countries have initiated reciprocal goodwill visits in recent months. Both also use Rafael fighters and find compelling reasons to collaborate in the defence matrix. Drone technologies and India's Brahmos missiles have great potential for strategic cooperation. As such there is a robust S& T cooperation between the two countries.

P2P engagement is often the key to a lasting relationship, but we faced the illegal migration problem for quite some time and, post various amnesty schemes and regularisation of their stay, the enterprising Indians have emerged a major asset for the Greek industry and agriculture. Over 20,000 Indians are said to be present and working in the country. However, to address the emergence issues, both sides have signed a MoU on Migration and Mobility. PM Modi is also expected to meet the Indian diaspora and pay homage to the fallen soldiers during the World Wars.

The relationship is a well-rounded one with all requisite elements to enrich the collaborative partnership.

Thus, the relationship is a well-rounded one, with all requisite elements to enrich the collaborative partnership. While bilaterally both have several initiatives to follow which will be further strengthened and expanded during the visit of PM Modi perhaps trilateral or quadrilateral format with Egypt, Israel and France may be able to craft more strategic choices for both after all they are strategic partners of India.