

Strengthening Air Defense in NATO's Southeastern Flank: Challenges and Prospects

Introduction:

As a geographical and political interface between Europe, the Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean, NATO's Southeastern flank has long been acknowledged as one of the Alliance's most strategically important areas. As new security issues threaten to jeopardise regional stability, its job has become increasingly complex in the twenty-first century. The need to strengthen territorial defence has been exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine, and the operational environment has changed due to the Middle East's escalating conflict, the spread of unmanned aerial systems, hybrid warfare tactics, and increased strategic competition.

In this regard, the United States functions as a crucial balancing and force-projection actor, while Greece, Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria occupy crucial roles as NATO's southeast front-line states. Acquiring cutting-edge equipment is not the only way to strengthen air defence in this area; a comprehensive framework of collaboration, modernisation, and integration is required.

The Southeastern flank's military importance stems from its topography. Controlling air and sea channels that support trade, energy flows, and military mobility, the area serves as NATO's main link to the Black Sea and the Middle East. Because of its ports, air bases, and steady diplomatic ties with Western allies, Greece in particular has become a key node in NATO military posture.

One of the most significant U.S. naval installations in the Mediterranean is located at Souda Bay in Crete, and Alexandroupolis, which is close to the Bulgarian border, has developed into a vital logistical hub for moving NATO troops and equipment to Eastern Europe without using the Bosphorus, which is under Turkish control. Russia's militarised presence in Crimea puts Romania and Bulgaria, which are located along the Black Sea, under direct strategic pressure, while Turkey's role has become more unclear as a result of its quest for defence autonomy and strategic balancing between NATO and Russia. The opportunities and vulnerabilities in the current air defence environment are determined by how these parties interact. (Yost, 2020)

In the end, the Southeastern flank is at a strategic crossroads that is characterised by both geography and the growing convergence of cyber, hybrid, and conventional threats. Protection of the region's military installations, energy infrastructure, and air and marine routes is crucial for transatlantic stability since they serve as the foundation for NATO's power projection towards the Black Sea and the Middle East. However, collective deterrence may be compromised by disparate national strategies, incompatible equipment, and changing regional alliances. Greece stands out in this context as a stabilising anchor that can promote intelligence sharing, interoperability, and cooperative operations planning. Therefore, maintaining NATO's Southeastern front's resilience, operational coherence, and strategic credibility requires strengthening integrated air defence, encouraging defense-industrial collaboration, and bolstering diplomatic cohesiveness.

Regional Alliances and the Changing Security Architecture

The security dynamics in the Middle East underwent a sea change with the Abraham Accords. The Accords tacitly sought to counter Iranian expansion by formalising defence cooperation between Israel and Gulf nations like Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

However, because Gulf states must weigh security cooperation with Israel against the possibility of inciting Iran or domestic criticism, these partnerships continue to be precarious. Iran has responded by boosting security cooperation with Syria and Iraq and fortifying relations with China and Russia. As a result, the area is changing into a multi-polar balance-of-power system in which smaller governments compete with major powers to avoid becoming dependent on one another. (Ulrichsen, 2021)

Nevertheless Turkey has a more nuanced position in the area. Its strategic posture has become more independent even if it is still a NATO ally. Most notably, Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system in 2019 highlighted questions about political alignment and created significant interoperability issues inside NATO's air defence network. These conflicting interests within the flank serve as an example of how alliance cohesion is a crucial component of air defence strategy. (Saltout, 2025)

UAV Presence, Hybrid Threats, and Cybersecurity: Strategic Imperatives for Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean

The aerial security landscape has changed as a result of the spread of Iranian-made drones via proxy networks and the development and use of domestic drones in Turkey. These devices change the balance of power at sea and across border zones by enabling monitoring, deterrence signalling, and precision strikes at comparatively low cost.

Greece has to improve its multi-domain deterrent capabilities in order to counter these new threats. This entails developing joint command fusion centres that connect air, naval, cyber, and space intelligence; extending UAV detection and neutralisation networks along its islands, maritime zones, and land borders; and incorporating artificial intelligence for early warning systems and real-time situational awareness. Furthermore, building robust cybersecurity and telecommunications infrastructure is crucial for safeguarding vital energy assets like offshore gas as well as military systems. (UNSC S/2021/979, 2021)

The significance of enhancing bilateral connections with the United States and expanding defence cooperation within NATO is highlighted by this strategic environment, especially in the areas of drone defence, cyber resilience, and maritime surveillance. Greece's ability to deter and counter hybrid threats is strengthened by increased access to U.S. strategic lift, radar systems, satellite intelligence, and joint exercises. In order to encourage domestic technical development and lessen long-term reliance on outside suppliers, Greece should simultaneously invest in European defence industrial cooperation. (Gawdat,2023)

In the end, safeguarding the Eastern Mediterranean necessitates coordinated political and diplomatic engagement with EU allies, regional governments, and transatlantic actors in addition to military adaptation. The stability of the Southeastern NATO flank and the future balance of power throughout the Mediterranean basin will depend on Greece's and its allies' capacity to effectively counter UAV incursions, cyberattacks, and hybrid influence operations. (Gurcan,2021)

Policy Recommendations: Strengthening Integrated Air and Multi-Domain Defense in the Southeastern NATO Flank

A number of coordinated policy initiatives at the national, regional, and alliance levels are needed to strengthen NATO's Southeastern flank. UAV proliferation, intense electronic warfare, hybrid influence operations, and growing great-power competition all influence the Eastern Mediterranean's strategic environment (IISS, 2024). Greece must pursue a defence strategy that integrates military modernisation with diplomatic coherence and the development of industrial capability because it is a key frontline state. The following policy recommendations are broken down into three categories: regional security diplomacy, institutional and alliance integration, and capability development.

First and foremost Greece should keep speeding up the modernisation of its air and missile defence, giving top priority to multi-layered interception architectures that integrate short-range counter-UAV weapons, mid-range air defence, and long-range detection. The growing discussion about a Greek "Iron Dome-type" solution has to concentrate on network integration spanning radar coverage, mobile interdiction systems, and collaborative targeting networks rather than just hardware procurement (Hellenic MOD, 2022). Reaction times would be shortened and operational accuracy would be improved by adapting NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) procedures to island, archipelagic, and maritime situations.

Second, the Eastern Mediterranean marine zones and the Aegean islands should have more UAV early warning and counter-UAV infrastructure. This needs to consist of:

- Dispersed sensor arrays
- AI-powered radar classification systems
- Platforms for spoofing and disrupting electronic warfare

Given the low cost and operational flexibility of Turkish-made and Iranian-supplied drones that are already widely used in the region, these capabilities are essential (UNSC S/2021/979, 2021; Ulgen, 2022).

Third, considering the growing overlap between physical and digital conflict, Greece should strengthen cybersecurity and satellite communication resilience. According to ENISA's evaluations, the region's main risks are threats to underwater data cables and offshore energy

platforms (ENISA, 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to invest in military-grade cloud infrastructure and secure, redundant networks.

Futhermore, Greece has to keep making local investments in defence industrial capability, especially in drone production, AI-enhanced ISR systems, and command-and-control software. Greece should position itself as a hub for secure networking and systems integration rather than directly competing with sophisticated producers like Israel or Turkey (Kousoulis, 2022). Greek universities, aerospace companies, and navy shipyards could get R&D funding through industrial partnerships under the EU Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and European Defence Fund frameworks.

Enhancing interoperability is crucial for unified air defence at the alliance level. In order to facilitate easier data exchange between air, naval, cyber, and space operations, Greece should increase its involvement in NATO's Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) integration pilots (U.S. DoD, 2021). In times of crisis, shared situational awareness minimises duplication, speeds up threat identification, and enhances decision-making.

The core of this strategy should continue to be collaboration with the United States. NATO's ability to provide troops to the Black Sea and Eastern Europe has already been improved by the Mutual Defence Cooperation Agreement (MDCA), which has increased U.S. access to Greek bases such Souda Bay, Skyros, and Alexandroupolis (CRS, 2024). Greece ought to bargain for more cooperative training exercises centred on:

- counter-actions to UAV swarms
- multilayer interception of missiles
- Simulations of cyber defence
- Operations in the electromagnetic spectrum

This would improve preparedness for situations involving hybrid and multi-domain conflicts.

Concurrently, NATO should establish an Eastern Mediterranean Air and Maritime Surveillance Network concurrently, connecting sensors from Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, and other allies. By

doing this, the fragmented national radar regimes and disparate security clearances that currently cause delayed detection times would be addressed (NATO, 2023). Shared analysis and quick reaction coordination could be improved by joint command centres, which might be situated in Larissa or Crete.

Greece should also encourage organised EU-Gulf defence discussions, especially with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, based on common worries about Iranian proxy networks, maritime security, and the proliferation of UAVs (Bahgat, 2023). Additionally, trilateral energy and naval cooperation platforms should be used to strengthen ties with Egypt and Israel. These agreements strengthen Greece's standing as a pillar of regional stability and thwart attempts by hostile forces to take advantage of political division.

Lastly, Greece should keep lines of communication open for regulated strategic discussion, especially with regard to airspace and sea patrol procedures, rather than engaging in zero-sum rivalry with Turkey. Selective collaboration on deconfliction mechanisms and disaster response can sustain minimum stability, lowering the risk of unintentional escalation, even though Ankara's defence autonomy trajectory will continue to cause friction (Gürcan, 2021).

Conclusion: Strategic Futures for Greece, NATO, and the Southeastern Flank

NATO's Southeastern flank's changing security environment highlights the significance of long-term strategic planning, persistent political commitment, and ongoing military capability adaption. Greece is positioned not only as a passive physical link but also as a key stabilising node in the Alliance's strategic architecture as geopolitical competition heats up across the Eastern Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Middle Eastern theatres. The future will depend on how well Greece and its allies handle three interrelated dynamics: the spread of sophisticated weaponry, especially UAVs and long-range precision capabilities; threats from cyberwarfare and hybrid warfare against vital infrastructure; and the diplomatic challenges of managing intra-alliance conflicts while maintaining deterrence credibility (Gawdat, 2023).

Greece's strategic aims in the future are probably going to focus on strengthening its links with American and European forces, developing its own military industry, and strengthening its position as a logistical, intelligence, and air defence platform for NATO operations. In addition to

tactical need, the growth of strategic centres like Alexandroupolis and Souda Bay indicates a larger trend towards Greece serving as a gateway for NATO reinforcement flows between Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. NATO's operational flexibility will be enhanced by ongoing investments in air, rail, and port infrastructure, which will also lessen chokepoint vulnerabilities in the event of uncertain Turkish cooperation (Yost, 2020).

However, Greece's future effectiveness will hinge on its ability to balance diplomatic pragmatism with strategic clarity. Turkish assertiveness—manifested through the Blue Homeland doctrine, UAV proliferation, and flexible alignment between Russia and NATO—remains the most persistent regional challenge. While periods of diplomatic de-escalation are possible, the structural drivers of Greek-Turkish rivalry in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean are unlikely to disappear. Thus, Greece must maintain a deterrence posture grounded in layered air and maritime defence networks, including modern fighter fleets like the F-35, expanded PATRIOT/ASTER coverage, and integrated drone defence systems capable of countering both mass saturation attacks and precision strike platforms (Saltout, 2025).

Greece's internal defense-industrial ecosystem needs to be updated concurrently. Whether Greece becomes a net contributor to NATO's technological advantage or stays reliant on outside suppliers will depend on its investments in UAV development, signal intelligence fusion, satellite networks, and counter-drone electronic warfare. Co-production and cooperative R&D can be facilitated through strategic cooperation with France, Israel, and the United States; nevertheless, this will necessitate consistent finance, bureaucratic change, and more precise industrial doctrine. Greece's diplomatic clout within the Alliance is bolstered by an industrial foundation that generates interoperable equipment, in addition to strengthening national defence (Gurcan, 2021).

Furthermore, the wider geopolitical unpredictability of the Middle East is inextricably linked to Greece's long-term security environment. The growing use of Iranian drone technology by non-state actors, such as the Houthis and Hezbollah, demonstrates how war can spread into Mediterranean maritime lanes that are vital to the energy security of Greece and Europe (UNSC S/2021/979, 2021). Greece must spearhead diplomatic alliances aimed at securing sea lines of communication while concurrently building in air and naval escort capabilities capable of responding to hybrid maritime threats as the world's reliance on Mediterranean LNG shipping

lanes increases. In addition to national might, coordinated marine domain awareness and shared reaction mechanisms will be crucial to the stability of the Mediterranean in the future.

Greece's strategic goal at the diplomatic level should be to manage internal alliance conflicts and strengthen NATO cohesion. If decision-making is hampered by internal political division, the Southeastern flank cannot function as an effective deterrence zone. By encouraging organised defence discussions that coordinate intelligence sharing, cyber threat coordination, and cooperative training frameworks, Greece can serve as a bridge between Western Europe, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Opportunities to integrate regional stability into transatlantic planning are provided by partnership structures as MED9, trilateral cooperation with Egypt and Israel, and NATO-EU task coordination mechanisms.

But Greece also needs to get ready for NATO settings in the future, which can be very different from the current one. There may be less direct naval presence in the Mediterranean if U.S. strategic priorities shift back towards the Indo-Pacific. European defence autonomy, especially Franco-Greek strategic cooperation, may take the stage in such a situation. Promoting European defence strengthening while making sure it enhances rather than replaces the U.S. security guarantee—which is still crucial for systemic stability and deterrence against Russia—will be Greece's diplomatic challenge (Ulrichsen, 2021).

In the end, the strength of shared institutions, the credibility of deterrence, and the willingness of nations to make investments in collective security even in times of relative calm will determine the strategic future of the Southeastern flank. Therefore, Greece has two tasks to complete: bolstering its national security posture and taking the initiative to design regional coordination inside NATO structures. This calls for consistent finance, strategic patience, and a defence mindset that sees security as a comprehensive system that includes energy security, information resilience, political stability, and technical innovation rather than just military preparedness.

In conclusion, Greece has the strategic ability and geopolitical position to influence the destiny of NATO's Southeastern flank. But only with careful planning, persistent modernisation, and diplomatic leadership will this potential be fulfilled. Greece can maintain the region's stability, resilience, and strategic importance by strengthening integrated air and maritime defence networks, increasing defense-industrial collaboration, and promoting institutional convergence

throughout NATO and the EU. Although there are many obstacles to overcome, there are also many chances to improve the Alliance's deterrence posture and ensure long-term stability in the Mediterranean.

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