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Greece: Vital Messages Needed on Obama's Final Trip to Europe

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The White House has announced a short-notice trip to Europe for November 15 to 18. President Barack Obama will start the trip in Greece, where he will meet with President Prokopios Pavlopoulos and Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras before traveling on to Germany.

Greece, a NATO member since 1952, hosts an important U.S. naval base at Souda Bay on the island of Crete. In the context of transatlantic security, however, Greece has been a troublesome ally in recent years. On his final trip to Europe, the President should use the opportunity to thank Greece for the continued use of Souda Bay; he should also express concern over Russian use of Greek ports, and Greece's continued blocking of Macedonia's accession to NATO. Most important, the President should carry the message that the U.S. remains committed to transatlantic security.

Maintaining Sanctions

Since coming to power, the leftist Syriza government of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has courted closer ties with Russia, in part to gain leverage in negotiations with the EU over the European economic crisis. During this time, Greece has maintained a cozy relationship with Moscow, placing it

out of synch with most of the rest of Europe. In May 2016, Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov traveled to Greece with an entourage of Russian business executives, some of whom are currently under sanction by the U.S.¹ During the press conference, Tsipras condemned the current EU economic sanctions against Russia.²

Despite Greece's close economic ties to both the EU and Russia, neither the EU sanctions nor the Russian counter sanctions have had a significant impact on the Greek economy. The 2015 drop in Greek exports to Russia was small compared with other EU economies' drop in exports to Russia.³ Greek commercial vessels have reportedly docked at ports in occupied Crimea, in violation of sanctions. According to reports, "There are several Greek vessels, owned by the Greeks but not operating under the Greek flag that are involved in illegal grain export from Sevastopol and Kerch."⁴

Moscow, for its part, sees Greece as a candidate to undermine Europe's collective response to Russia's military aggression. During his visit to Greece, Putin referred to his host country as "Russia's important partner in Europe."⁵ Putin knows that the EU decision to renew sanctions requires unanimity and he hopes that Greece will someday block, and then end, the EU's sanctions.

Hosting the Russian Navy

Even with Russia's continued illegal occupation of Crimea, its support for the war in eastern Ukraine, and its unconditional support for Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, Greece continues to provide Moscow with military support by welcoming Russia's navy into its ports. On October 31, the Russian

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navy's destroyer *Smetlivy* left Sevastopol in occupied Crimea for Piraeus, Greece, where according to Russian media the ship took part in a "festival" dedicated to the Russian–Greek year of culture.⁶ The *Smetlivy* then joined the Russian naval task force in the ongoing military operations in Syria.⁷ This is not the first time that Greece has hosted the Russian navy. In June 2015, the Russian landing ship *Korolev 130* also visited the port of Piraeus.⁸

This visit was particularly worrying because Greece is not only a member of NATO and the EU, but also home to a NATO and U.S. naval base on Crete. It is unacceptable that a member a NATO and the EU that hosts an important U.S. base would welcome the Russian navy into its ports at this time. The recent visit of the destroyer *Smetlivy* is even more shocking as it departed from a port in occupied Crimea and will participate in Russia's military operation in Syria.

Macedonia's NATO Membership

With the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, Macedonia became an independent state under its new constitutional name: Republic of Macedonia. Greece quickly protested on the baseless grounds that the name Macedonia, which is the same as that of Greece's northern province, implied regional territorial claims by the new nation.

In 1993, Macedonia joined the United Nations under the provisional term "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia." In 1995, Macedonia and Greece agreed to a U.N.-brokered interim accord in which Athens agreed not to block Macedonia's integration into international organizations, such as

NATO, so long as it called itself "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" until both sides agreed on a mutually acceptable name.

Macedonia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1995 and received NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 1999. Upon completing its MAP in 2008—meaning it had met all requirements to join the alliance—Macedonia anticipated an invitation to join that year at the NATO summit in Bucharest. At the last minute, Greece unilaterally vetoed Macedonia's accession over the name issue.

In December 2011, the International Court of Justice ruled that Greece's veto was in blatant violation of the 1995 interim accord. Even so, Greece continues to block Macedonia's membership to the detriment of the alliance.

Time to Apply Pressure

In his only trip to Greece, President Obama should raise several critical issues, including Greek support of the Russian navy and its blocking of NATO enlargement for Macedonia. The U.S. should:

- **Pressure Greece to vote for renewed sanctions.** In December, the EU will vote on extending its economic sanctions against Russia. This matter is decided by unanimity, meaning that a single EU country can force the conclusion, or at least the watering down, of sanctions. The President should encourage Greece to do the right thing and support sanctions renewal in December.
- **Object to Russian war ships in Greek ports.** While Crimea remains illegally occupied and

1. United States Department of the Treasury, "Office of Foreign Asset Control: Specifically Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List," November 1, 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/ofac/downloads/sdnlist.pdf> (accessed November 3, 2016).

2. "Greece's Tsipras Condemns Sanctions Against Russia," BBC, May 28, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36403129> (accessed November 3, 2016).

3. RadioFreeEurope–RadioLiberty, "Side Effect of EU Sanctions," <http://www.rferl.org/a/28071947.html> (accessed November 3, 2016).

4. "Which EU Commercial Ships Still Go to Russian-Occupied Crimea?" *Ukraine Today*, October 7, 2016, <http://uatoday.tv/politics/which-eu-commercial-ships-still-go-to-russian-occupied-crimea-781809.html> (accessed November 3, 2016).

5. Holly Ellyatt and Julia Chatterley, "Russia Can Get a Strategic Geopolitical Boost from Greece: Minister," CNBC, June 16, 2016, <http://www.cnbc.com/2016/06/16/russia-can-get-a-strategic-geopolitical-boost-from-greece-minister.html> (accessed November 3, 2016).

6. "Russian Destroyer *Smetlivy* Sets Out from Crimea for Festival in Greece," RT, October 29, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/in-motion/364686-russian-destroyer-greek-festival/> (accessed November 3, 2016).

7. News release, "Russia Sends Naval Destroyer *Smetlivy* to Syria: State Newspaper," Reuters, October 28, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-destroyer-idUSKCN1251XG> (accessed November 3, 2016).

8. Shipspotting.com, "RFS KOROLEV 130," June 5, 2015, <http://www.shipspotting.com/gallery/photo.php?lid=2260368> (accessed September 9, 2015).

Russia continues its support for Syrian dictator Assad, President Obama must be crystal clear that Greek support for the Russian navy is unbecoming of a NATO ally. He should encourage Athens to follow Spain's recent example and cancel future visits by the Russian navy.

- **Make the case for Macedonia.** Greece's pertinacious opposition over the name issue, coupled with the illegality of its position under international law, has jeopardized NATO's open-door policy. The U.S. should encourage Greece to allow Macedonia to join NATO under the terms of the 1995 interim accord.

Conclusion

President Obama's trip to Greece presents a valuable opportunity. The President should reiterate America's commitment to transatlantic security and the U.S.'s continuing friendship with Greece. As friends, the President should also be frank in criticizing Greek support for Russia and its continued obstruction of Macedonia's entry into NATO. He should advocate policies that enhance NATO, while countering Russian attempts to garner influence in Athens.

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