

Greece's Turbulent Relations With its Neighbors

The dispute over the name of Macedonia, Albania's Ionian sea borderline, Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon reserves and the Aegean Sea with Turkey, Greece's relations with neighboring countries have been quite turbulent for a long time. Notwithstanding the enormous internal problems that even put the government of Cyprus at risk, Greece is pressing for the soonest solution to the pending historical issues with Albania, Macedonia, and Turkey.

Greece – Albania

In 2009, under Berisha's governance, an agreement was reached between Albania and Greece over the sea border, by which Albania would lose around 335km² of sea area. But it was abolished by Albanian Constitutional Court in 2010 as being anti-constitutional. Anticipating to find oil and impatient to resolve disputes diplomatically and legally, officials in Athens had decided to set the sea borders with Albania unilaterally and forcefully. This action preceded an imminent conflict between the two countries, as Greece takes the Albanian sea forcibly.

Fortunately, direct negotiations between the two parties have started again last year. The two delegations have a number of issues to discuss. The most important ones of these are about determining the sea border between the two countries, the Cham issue, the "Law of War" still in force in Greece, the Greek minorities and border problems with immigrants, etc. The Albanian government has chosen to remain silent in these discussions. Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias gave little information regarding the negotiations, according to whom there are two essential details: Albania has agreed that Greece will extend the sea border to 12 miles (22.22km²) which is less than the previous one, and the crucial Cham issue (Albanians in Greece) was not negotiated.

The key point in this sea border issue is that an estimated 100 billion dollar amount of petrol and hydrocarbon has been discovered. With this agreement, Greece might give a small area from the previous agreement near the island of Barketa to Albania, but they get the sea area where the oil is. With this 'trade' Rama seems to trick Albanians that what the previous Prime Minister Sali Berisha gave to the Greeks is now returned, thus strengthens his personal power by accusing the opposition of treason. On the other side, Kotzias stands the ground firmly in his own country as he wins an over 100 billion-euro oil valley in exchange for "worthless sea bans" near Barketa Island. In addition to silencing the Greek opposition, Kotzias uses the following two arguments: the economic oil zone is acquired and the package of all issues with Albania that no previous Greek government could have reached for 30 years is now closed.

Mr. Kotzias's assertions raise a lot of important questions. Has the new government of Edi Rama accepted in other terms what the previous Sali Berisha's government negotiated? Has Albania given away more than it did previously? Is Albania's greatest achievement Greece's agreement of opening negotiations for EU membership, fixed as in 2009, when the first sea border agreement was reached, and Greece's approval for Albania's NATO membership? These we cannot know as long as the government is silent.

Greece – Macedonia

Immediately after the declaration of independence in 1991, Macedonia set full NATO and EU membership among its top objectives, while good neighbor relations and regional co-operation were determined as national interests. These objectives were at the same time the objectives of a broad political and foreign policy social platform. But with the name problem with Greece being present, challenges in achieving these goals in the country's foreign policy came up.

Unfortunately, the name issue which has been present between Greece and Macedonia since 2006 onwards was a cause for the escalation of nationalism among the Macedonians.

According to the Greek thesis, today's Macedonia has never existed in the history and was created for ideological reasons after World War II by then Yugoslavia's president J.B.Tito. This thesis faced fierce criticism from Macedonians for many years. Official Athens announces that the name "Macedonia" is a historical heritage of the Greeks and for years refuses to recognize Macedonia under its constitutional name. While the basic argument presented by Macedonian officials against Greece is that the name "Macedonia" represents the core of the Macedonian national identity, basing it on the principle that every state has the sovereign right to determine its name. But Greece reiterates it will continue to impose its veto on the country's NATO and EU membership if the name does not change. The European Commission often proposed initiation of negotiations with Macedonia for membership but has not been able to overcome Greece's barrier. Because of this obstacle, Macedonia in 2009 lost the chance of joining NATO together with Albania and Croatia.

Unfortunately, the name issue which has been present between Greece and Macedonia since 2006 onwards was a cause for the escalation of nationalism among the Macedonians. With new buildings and statues of antic heroes such as Alexander the Great and his family in the center of Skopje, restoring old buildings and expensive statues, former Macedonian nationalist government was trying to turn Skopje's center into an almost majestic ancient city, trying to prove historic ties between the ancient state of Alexander the Great, Tsar Samoil, one of the medieval leaders of the Bulgarian soil, and contemporary Macedonia. But this historical approach of the former Macedonian government raised great concerns not only for Greece but also for Bulgaria and Serbia.

With last year's elections and the Socialist Party coming to power in broad coalition with Albanians, current Prime Minister Zaev tries to open a new page in terms of interethnic peace in the country and relations with neighbors. But in the path that pervades there is the possibility of facing various obstacles. Thus, in the way of solving Macedonia's name problem, Zaev expects support from friendly countries, like Turkey. After meeting with Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on February 12, Zaev saw an ally in Turkey regarding the name issue. The earliest solution to the name problem, which has a great impact ranging from domestic relations to relations with the neighbors, will positively reflect on the Balkan geography.

So as Macedonia's 'Name Game' seems eventually to approach its end, one thing we should be reminded of here is that there won't be a compromise in any case, but a total imposition of Greece's stance toward Macedonia.

It's pure Zero Sum Game. Greece has no exclusivity upon the name of Macedonia since the territory of antique and Ottoman Macedonia is much larger than the one today.

International community's stance, in this case, is unprecedentedly arbitrated!
And of course, there should be an internally genuine compromise on a name that would be comprehensive, one which is going to include and be accepted by all ethnic communities in Macedonia.

In line with our main aim here to try to answer our question, we ask once again: Why is Greece urging to close all these issues with Albania and Macedonia, moreover that the Greek citizens and the Greek opposition have reacted aggressively by seeking at least transparency and clarity for the issues that have been agreed upon? Greek citizens have severely reacted to Macedonia and the Greek opposition has harshly reacted to the secret "bargains" with Albania.

There is only one reason: Greece wants to enter free handed in troublesome issues with Turkey, which is not easy to deal with, same as it shows superior position, imposition with conditional terms dealing with Albania or Macedonia.

Is Greece trying to use Turkey's focus on the terror danger in the eastern border with Syria and Iraq, to gain position and push Turkey for quicker new deals in the Mediterranean sea which would be in favor of Greece, especially with the recently estimated up to 1.3 trillion euros petrol and hydrocarbon discovery?

In search of setting a unilateral EEZ and Oil

Athens has moved for petrol and hydrocarbon searches in the Ionian Sea and south of Crete via the Norwegian PGS ship, while 3 major multinational companies have formally expressed interest in exploring an area of 220,000 km². A natural wealth under the sea estimated at 1.3 trillion euros, with which Greece believes it can pay off its debts and emerge from an economic collapse. Demand for oil is being developed without setting borders with its neighbors Albania, Italy, Turkey and Turkish Cypriots.

Recently the newspaper "To Vima" has announced that the Greek government is considering the possibility of depositing at the United Nations the coordinates of the outer limits of the Greek continental shelf and the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), set out unilaterally. The newspaper reports that the idea of unilateral declaration may also cause a hot episode with Turkey and reactions from other neighboring countries. As revealed in the report, the Agency has completed its work and discussions continue in the respective departments of the Foreign Ministry for the legal treatment of this initiative and its deposition at the UN, however, there are objections to deposit coordinates, as there is a fear of failure in talks with Turkey, as well as other neighboring countries, who are opposed to unilateral actions. Athens and Cairo have been holding expert-level talks on the delimitation of the EEZ for more than ten years. Egypt strives to maintain the balance in the region, while the situation is dim with Libya, which is at a transitional stage during this period.

Eastern Mediterranean Crisis

Following the steps of Greece in the Western Mediterranean and Ionian sea border with Albania, Greek Cypriots backed by Greece are doing the same thing, taking unilateral moves which have been commissioning Western energy companies to explore hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean in an area declared as exclusive economic zone (EEZ). These moves have been awaited with harsh reaction by Turkey which sees it as a violation of the sovereign rights of Turkish Cyprus. In this regard, Turkey immediately deployed warships to the region and prevented the Italian energy firm ENI from continuing its operations in the region. ENI two month ago revealed the discovery of a potentially sizable gas field off the southwestern coast close to Egypt's Zohr deposit, which is the largest-ever discovered in the Mediterranean. As a result of Turkish vessels intervention, ENI's drilling vessel left the area. That unilateral move from Greek Cyprus intended to exclude Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and Turkey from the region, which has been conducting seismic surveys in the area and exercising its legal rights in accordance with international maritime law.

Following the Turkish Navy's blockade of ENI, vessels from U.S. oil giant ExxonMobil and state-owned Qatar Petroleum consortium were reported to have arrived in the Eastern Mediterranean to conduct offshore drilling activities. Toward the end of last year, in order to gain more partners in the region Greece conducted common military maritime exercises with Egypt and recently numerous agreements with Israel regarding oil in the Mediterranean have been written. All these moves can be seen as anti-Turkish actions and tentative to encircle it, aiming to reduce its power and area of action in the region.

As we mentioned earlier these moves, Greece in Ionian sea dealing with Albania's sea border and Macedonia's Name Issue in one hand and Greek Cypriots' actions in Eastern Mediterranean on the other hand come at the time when Turkey is engaged in anti-terrorism operations elsewhere in the East of its borders fighting DAESH, PKK/YPG/PYG, as well as internally fighting FETO, where most of its forces are focused on. Obviously here Greece & Co have seen the opportunity of acting, in terms of taking unilateral actions in both sides of the Mediterranean sea to benefit from newly found huge hydrocarbon resources by excluding Turkey and Northern Cyprus, and against any international maritime law, claiming exclusivity over the region. On the other hand, Turkey now has already shown and testified its tremendous ability to act effectively at multiple fronts at once and these plans and unilateral actions by Greek neighbors to 'surprise' and take advantage have obviously been unsuccessful.

"All steps in the waters surrounding Cyprus should be taken through the participation of both Turkish and Greek parties, including investments and the share of discovered resources," Erdogan said regarding the issue.