

«Contemporary Security Challenges in Europe, Mediterranean and Greece: The Role of NATO and EU" Symposium»



Remarks by H. E. the Ambassador of the United States of America in Greece, Mr. Geoffrey Pyatt

Thank you very much for the introduction Dr. Mitsakos. It's a great pleasure for me to be here today to talk about some of the key security challenges facing our two nations and I want to start by thanking the Greek Association for Atlantic and European Cooperation for fostering this dialogue on some of the key issues confronting us.

I'm going to start with the core point which is that the United States and Greece share a strong and enduring partnership based on a mutual commitment to core democratic values, which are the foundation of peace and security and prosperity for Europe. President Obama's recent visit here to Greece underscores the importance of our alliance and reflects the value that the United States places on Greece – as a pillar of strength and stability in this region, as a NATO ally, and as an EU Member State. The President also chose to come to Greece in his final official overseas trip to recognize the lasting importance of democracy, a value that was born here, and the impact that it has had on our societies and to show solidarity with the people of Greece.

In today's world, with the variety of threats that we face, NATO continues to be the cornerstone of defense policy for Europe and the United States. The Transatlantic Alliance is our automatic starting point when we approach the most vexing problems. Whether it's ISIL, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, the unprecedented migration flows to Europe, these are the challenges that are in the headlines every day, where Greece is at the forefront. And just as we cannot ignore these threats to our security, we cannot face them alone.

Secretary Kerry spoke to these issues at his last NATO Foreign Ministerial this week. He pointed out that: "There's nothing nostalgic about our need to constantly reaffirm the importance of collective defense and democratic solidarity. We've learned from experience – long experience going back to the last century, that peace is best kept through strength and unity, through clarity of purpose and intent, and those qualities, I think, remain at the heart of the NATO mission... Those leaders understood the absolute necessity of defending and strengthening the liberal world order. And they recognized that it's never enough to just speak out about values of tolerance, openness, democracy, rule of law, and good governance – we have to preserve and protect those cherished hopes, aspirations, and we have to do so every single day in word and in deed."

Of course, at the top of any list of international challenges right now is the crisis in Syria. The campaign to defeat ISIL is a shared goal of every NATO ally and EU member state and one that immediately affects the security interests of Greece. The military campaign has already liberated much of the territory once controlled by ISIL and dealt serious blows to the organization. But, at the same time, we continue to work toward a political solution in Syria. What is happening in Aleppo today is the largest humanitarian disaster around Europe since the Second World War. Further complicating the situation is the decision by Russia to associate its interests with Assad, a man who has been responsible for slaughtering his own people.

We are going to continue to try to find a way forward in order to end this war. We remain committed to a peaceful, stable, whole, united, nonsectarian Syria. We stress that all parties, all parties, have a duty to enable the secure delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Ending the war in Syria is necessary for many reasons, including to reduce the flow of migrants and refugees into Europe. Greece deserves great credit for trying to cope with this multifaceted crisis in a humane way; but it cannot bear this burden alone. Ultimately, the only lasting solution to the refugee flows is to stop the wars and the conflicts that drive people from their homes in the first place. In the meantime, NATO's Maritime Activity in the Aegean under the Standing NATO Maritime Group II – or SNMG II – plays a key, stabilizing role to prevent the smuggling of migrants to Greece.

Beyond the challenges to the east of Greece, I'd like to take a closer look at another factor that is complicating our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace – and that is Russia. For more than 20 years, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States sought to build a constructive relationship with Russia, and to support Russia's greater integration into regional and global institutions. Our thinking was that a more integrated, and democratic, and prosperous Russia would be a more reliable partner for the United States and for our allies.

We had some success and some challenges, but Russia's 2014 invasion of sovereign Ukrainian territory shattered any remaining illusions about this Kremlin's willingness to abide by international law or live by the rules of the institutions that Russia itself signed on to at the end of the Cold War. And I hope we are all very clear on the importance of the legal principle that international borders cannot be changed by force, as Russia did when it invaded Crimea.

This is not just something that affects Ukraine, the Baltic countries, or Poland and Romania. There are also implications much closer to us here in the Mediterranean. Over the past three years, we have seen that Russia has deployed new lethal and long-range anti-aircraft defenses attempting to keep Western forces out of three key regions: the Baltics, the Black Sea, and the Levant. Anti-access/area denial is increasing.

Initially, we saw this happening in Northern Europe, where missiles based in Kaliningrad could reach Polish airspace and shut down NATO reinforcements to the Baltics in the event of a crisis. To the south, following the illegal occupation of Crimea, Russia has increased its deployments to that peninsula and developed very strong anti-access/area denial capabilities in the Black Sea. Anti-ship cruise missiles can now range the entire Black Sea, and air defense missiles cover about 45 to 50 percent of that region.

With the Russian military presence in Syria, we now see a third arena of area denial posturing in the Eastern Mediterranean, including sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons that go beyond what is needed in the fight against ISIL. These actions introduce another element of risk to an already active and complicated part of the world. Developments in this region are inextricably interlinked, and NATO allies need to be prepared for the variety of threats that we now face. This presents the opportunity to invest in upgrading the responsiveness of the entire NATO force structure.

To that end, the United States has quadrupled, multiplied times four, the amount of money that we are spending on security in Europe. We are investing over \$3 billion to ensure that American land, sea, and air presence in Poland and the Baltic States, Romania, and Bulgaria will continue through 2017. This funding will also allow us to pre-position equipment in Europe and it will allow us to strengthen infrastructure in Western Europe so we can get to the east faster, if we need to.

We continue to encourage all NATO allies to invest at least 2 percent of GDP in defense and, especially with the Chief of Defense now here, I want to commend Greece for being among the handful

of countries to fulfill this commitment, despite the severe economic challenges that your country has faced over the past several years. So, thank you, sir. We are also pleased to see that an overall trend of declining investment in defense seems to have been stopped, and now needs to be reversed.

Beyond NATO, regional partnerships on trade, tourism, energy, and cultural exchange, contribute greatly to regional peace and stability. In this regard as well, we applaud Greece's regional leadership. There are particular opportunities for growth in regional energy cooperation. Prime Minister Tsipras' inauguration of the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline – or TAP – was a dramatic illustration of this country's potential to emerge as a key European energy hub. TAP is the final link in the Southern Corridor project to bring gas from Azerbaijan to other parts of Europe via Greece.

We also strongly support a complimentary project, the Greece-Bulgaria Interconnector, which would unlock Bulgaria from its dependence on Russian gas. These pipelines will inject millions of dollars into the Greek economy and put thousands of Greeks to work, all while diversifying energy sources in Europe. This kind of energy diversification is critical for the future of Europe.

And, again, let me underline, we all want to work with a Russia that is just as committed to solving common challenges. And, when we work together, we can get results. We saw this, for instance, in the Iran nuclear negotiations. Russia was a critical part of the P5+1 and their efforts were key to helping us close that deal. NATO also remains open to a political dialogue with Russia, but we must refrain from business as usual with Russia until Russia fully implements its commitments under the Minsk Agreements. Our transatlantic unity in the face of Russia's actions, violating core Euro-Atlantic principles, has been one of our most important accomplishments of recent years.

To conclude, what the United States is able to achieve in this part of the world, together with allies, is thanks in great part to the strong bilateral defense relationship we enjoy with Greece. As I have seen firsthand, our long-standing military presence at Souda Bay, on the island of Crete, embodies the close ties and commonality of goals that we share as we face common challenges. The security threats to the region around Greece have become much more complex in recent years. I expect that is a trend that will continue and, as it does, the United States will continue to look to Greece as a key pillar of regional stability. And you can be sure that, even as we go through a Presidential transition in Washington, the U.S. will remain steadfast in our support for and cooperation with our NATO allies, who remain our closest friends and most capable partners. Thank you very much and I look forward to it.

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Q: Good afternoon. My name is Captain Panagiotis Papandreou and I would like to ask you this. I have listened very carefully about everything you've said about the threats that the NATO, and Greece, and countries in the area are facing. But I would like to, if you want, to comment about some other threats that Greece is facing right now which are threats coming from a NATO ally--from Turkey, and, also, from another NATO ally, Albania, and, of course, from the others, neighbors from the north, like FYROM? And what is the U.S. is going to say to Greece about that? Are they going to give us some kind of assurances or what is the policy? Thank you.

A: First off, thank you very much. Those are important questions and we talk about them with our Greek allies all the time in the spirit of our alliance. I would make a couple of observations. As I said in my prepared remarks, we really do see Greece as a key pillar of regional stability in what is, obviously, a very complicated region. We also see Greece as a country with potential to be an important driver of prosperity in increasing economic cooperation in this region. That's why, in my remarks, I talk for instance about the energy issue which is an area of obvious convergence of interests between Greece and Turkey, Greece and its neighbors to the north.

I also would note, in the context of what is a very candid and intensive conversation between Washington and Athens, with all of our Greek government counterparts, it's very clear to us that, if you

look at the region, that Greece is strongly interested in having the most stable and cooperative relationship with all of its neighbors. I have said in interviews recently that, quite arguably, of all the EU members states, there is probably no country which is more interested in a stable, cooperative relationship with Turkey than is Greece because you are immediately impacted by relations with your neighbor.

So, we have been encouraged by the sophistication that the Greek government, the Greek military leadership has demonstrated in its reactions to your neighbors. We also are very strongly supportive of efforts to develop and intensify bilateral channels of communication. That's why, for instance, we have been strongly supportive of the efforts by Prime Minister Tsipras to arrange an early meeting with Mr. Erdogan. In fact, this was an active topic of conversation this week in the series of multilateral meetings that took place around Europe.

We recognize that you live in a complicated region, but we are also strongly convinced that the best answer to address those challenges is by deepening the ties and cooperation and extending the vision of Europe whole, free, and at peace which has done so much to take a region that, historically, saw incredible violence and turn it in to a region of cooperation. One of the... in the introduction it was mentioned, my experience in Ukraine, one of the things that you take away, I took away from that experience was how extraordinarily attractive the European model remains today. I saw 45 million Ukrainians put everything on the line to be part of a Europe which was a zone of economic cooperation, a zone of rule of law, a zone of democratic values. And I think, as President Obama observed when he was here a couple of weeks ago, we should not belittle that accomplishment. Arguably one of mankind's greatest accomplishments of the 20th century was to take a Europe that saw such incredible violence during its first half and turn it into the world's largest zone of economic cooperation.

So, again, we recognize the challenges, we believe your government is on the right track in thinking about them, and we are committed to being strong allies as you continue to contend with them.

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Q: Good morning. I am Vice Admiral Makris and I have a complementary question because we have covered many around our northern borders but can you comment on the failed state, if we can say so, for Libya? The black hole [unintelligible] ... in our proximity?

A: Thank you, Admiral, for making that point. I have often said that, if you draw a Venn diagram of this region, there are three circles which come together: one is the circle which, of course, comes with the security challenges that come out of Syria, Iraq, and the Eastern Mediterranean; another is a circle which reflects the security challenges arising from militarization of the Black Sea, expands to Russia; and the third circle is that which reflects developments in North Africa. Where that Venn diagram comes together is right here with Greece. So we recognize that you are living in a very complicated neighborhood.

I think as far as the situation in Northern Africa, in particular, is concerned, what we are committed to is having an open dialogue with Greece, our cooperation on operations out of Souda Bay are important in this regard. But we also recognize – and, again, you look at those three circles – Greece finds itself, essentially, as the vanguard of Europe in dealing with these three overlapping regions of challenge. And that's exactly why, in my view, we need to continue to intensify our security and military partnership, we need to live up to our commitments as an alliance, but we also need to have a very clear and intensive conversation between our defense planners our security planners so we are understanding each other's perspectives.

One of the reasons that I will not be able to stay for the rest of today's deliberations is that I am hosting a visit today from European Command... and we will see the Admiral later on this afternoon to debrief on what was a very successful Joint Staff Talks and, listening to our team from European Command, I know they were extremely impressed by the quality of presentations and candor that they-- with which these conversations were able to take place. And we have these kinds of joint staff talks with all our NATO allies but this conversation, which just took place this week, is clearly in the top tier in terms of the quality of the discussion, and I'm committed to continuing that.

There are no easy answers to any of these challenges. As I said in my remarks, from a strategic planning standpoint, the most likely scenario is that these circumstances continue to remain difficult in the years ahead, which is exactly why we need to double down on our alliance with Greece. Because you are going to be a reliable pillar of stability as we confront these situations where we have an almost one hundred percent convergence, in terms of our strategic objectives. But we have to work through these and recognize that there are times when the ability of the United States, NATO, the European Union or anybody else to achieve an immediate resolution of the problem is going to be limited, so what we need to do is to build our defenses and develop a strategy for dealing with those contingencies.

Thank you.